



From the Beginning: Bay Area Video Coalition's Founding through to 2016

In a 1976 video shared with the Bay Area Video Coalition by the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society, a man in San Francisco's Castro District is being interviewed when suddenly he stops, mid-interview, and suggests that the man behind the camera -- the interviewer -- go to a meeting at "the main library, Civic Center" to share with "all the video people" in the Bay Area what they could do if they had "a center for video." He mentions "a study for the Rockefeller Foundation" and that "It's for video people; regardless of what your trip is. If you're into video, do it."^[1]

In the late 60s and early 70s a new technology revolutionized media. Battery-powered and portable enough to be operated by a single person, the Portapak recording system offered ordinary people the possibility of creating their own video content. Portapak inspired and motivated a new generation of activists, artists and community groups who quickly seized upon the opportunity to tell new stories to larger and more diverse audiences. Social issue and experimental media making exploded around San Francisco and the Bay Area. So many independent video makers were applying to the Rockefeller Foundation for support during that time, in fact, that Howard Klein, then Director of Arts for Rockefeller, arranged a meeting of Bay Area video makers in 1976 to determine if there was a way to commonly support their efforts.

That initial collaboration of artists, activists, broadcasters, funders and industry -- those meetings at places like "the main library, Civic Center" -- sparked a unique synergy that led to the founding of the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), and has sustained it ever since.

As a not-for-profit, BAVC has always been supported by numerous individuals, and government and foundation entities. Before being granted nonprofit status, BAVC operated from the Archdiocesan Communication Center at 50 Oak Street, just off of Market Street in the building that now houses the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Without the not-for-profit status

required to apply for grants from funding institutions, BAVC was fiscally sponsored by the Archdiocesan Communication Center and applied for funding through them.

Upon formal incorporation in 1977, BAVC moved to its second location, the red brick building at 2940 16th Street in the Mission District. During this time, BAVC established its membership program for \$10 a year and created America's first nonprofit, broadcast-level suite that conformed to PBS standards. At the 16th Street location, BAVC also offered its first-ever workshop, "Color Production," taught with a Hitachi FP-1020 camera and JVC portable recorder. Designated a "Major Media Center" by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1978, BAVC became renowned for offering industry-standard technology to people outside the mainstream broadcast echelon. In this spirit, in 1980, BAVC opened its first job center - a space for students, job seekers and industry professionals to network and share work opportunities.



In the Summer of 1982, BAVC moved to its third location at 1111 17th Street in Potrero Hill. As portable as Portapak video proved to be, it also proved to break more often than running functionally. To better support Portapak users, BAVC began an early version of what is now its Education department. The workshops and classes offered evolved throughout the 1980s and 90s. With the dawn of new, more efficient personal video technologies, Portapak eventually became obsolete. To ensure that historic content filmed on Portapak and other early video formats would not be lost, BAVC was awarded an NEA Challenge Grant to develop an in-house video preservation center.

With an ever-expanding roster of classes and resources for film and television creators of all stripes, BAVC moved to a more expansive location at 2727 Mariposa St. – formerly the Best Foods mayonnaise factory – in 1997. At this time, BAVC launched its JobLink program, an intensive, no-cost media training program for low-income San Francisco residents -- the echoes of which can today be felt in San Francisco's TechSF Program operated by BAVC: a city-sponsored initiative that assists unemployed and underemployed San Francisco residents in finding meaningful work in the tech industry. By 1999, BAVC offered over 500 workshops per year, winning the Best Practices Award from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for its JobLink efforts. This same year, BAVC established YouthLink, its media training program for low-income youth in the community.

The new millennium found BAVC collaborating with KQED on *Spark*, a co-production about the Bay Area arts scene. Numerous films nominated for Academy Awards completed their Post Production and close-captioning at BAVC, including *The Weather Underground*, which was

nominated for Best Documentary in 2004. In 2006, BAVC added YouthSounds, a music and video production training program, to YouthLink. In offering more expansive trainings, YouthLink became known as Next Gen and began serving over 500 low-income youth per year. In 2010, BAVC became the official home to SF Commons, San Francisco's Public Access Television station and also expanded its Employee Training Panel (ETP) efforts to offer more no-cost training to companies looking to expand their staff's technical expertise. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation recognized BAVC with its prestigious Award for Creative & Effective Institutions in 2011.



Since 1991, BAVC has offered MediaMaker Fellowships to independent artists working on social issue film and multimedia projects. Now known as the National MediaMaker Fellowship Program and supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, The Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts and the California Wellness Foundation, this program nurtures filmmakers and artists the country over on projects seen internationally. In 2012, BAVC became

the first-ever Tech Sector Coordinator for the City of San Francisco. For its work with freelancers, BAVC was named by the Aspen Institute as a participant in its national “Communities That Work” partnership in 2015. That same year, BAVC launched its first official Artist-in-Residence Program offering support, exhibition and public programming opportunities to artists working in the San Francisco Bay Area.

One of the ways in which BAVC remains connected to that which made it a formal nonprofit organization initially is its preservation program. Since 1994 BAVC has served as a national hub for the preservation of culturally significant and community-based audio and moving image media. To this day, BAVC preserves the very type of media for which it became an organization in 1976 — Portapak ½” open-reel video. Through its preservation efforts, BAVC continues to serve the artists, activists and community groups which have used video since the 1960s and 70s. Much of BAVC's preservation work is seen in museums, archives and libraries across the country, ensuring that vital pieces of history and vital images and sounds of San Francisco are digitized and preserved in perpetuity.

These and countless other BAVC initiatives were supervised and spearheaded by a successive line of Executive Directors, starting 1976 with Gail Waldron, who served in the position until Spring of 1983. BAVC's current Executive Director is Carol Varney.

BAVC's programs and community offerings have grown considerably. The sheer number of activities that BAVC hosts and participates in within a given year make it an asset to San Francisco and the media making communities and neighborhoods it serves, helping to amplify stories and voices that might not otherwise have a chance to be heard; ensuring that those kept outside the barriers of certain jobs have a chance to participate. Through all of its many initiatives, the organization still operates in the same neighborly, skill-sharing way in which it was first founded.

Long before the rest of the world realized that we had entered an Information Age, BAVC's founders recognized that the relentless march of technology, and its high price tag, would effectively block equal participation in the dissemination of information by nonprofits and the causes and populations that they exist to serve. They founded BAVC in an attempt to level the playing field by providing low-cost access to the most current, up-to-the-minute commercial grade equipment, training and technical assistance to underserved communities.

BAVC realized that training in media technology was going to be as crucial to its stakeholders as access to emerging technology tools. BAVC now offers nearly 600 hands-on classes and workshops annually in the areas of video production, postproduction, audio, graphic design, game design/3D media arts, motion graphics and effects, virtual reality production, web design and programming.

While the technological landscape is ever-changing, BAVC's mission to bring increased cultural and economic participation to underserved communities in San Francisco through media, and our belief that telling stories has transformative potential for both media maker and audience, remains. Over the past 40 years, BAVC has developed an entrepreneurial and adaptive web of programs and services that bring together a multi-generational mix of artists, experienced media professionals, educators, low-income youth and adults, and industry partners in that pursuit.

Its San Francisco location and deep connections to the heart of the digital media industry support BAVC's role in community and economic development. On a given day at BAVC's Mariposa St. facility, young people create beats or design games, learning invaluable skills that will lift them into lifelong careers in the tech and entertainment industries. On that same day, lifetime San Francisco residents in their 60s or 70s, experiment with editing techniques for their public access television programs, which allow them to share their unique perspective on neighborhood issues and goings on with an audience. Down the hall, people take an Adobe Photoshop or Virtual Reality production and post-production class, learning techniques that will help them to stay current with current digital marketing trends. BAVC is where technology, art and social justice meet.

This type of community-oriented organization is essential to the character of San Francisco and its unique diversity of residents. As technology and all it brings to the city start to outpace all else, BAVC helps to keep the culture and stories of San Francisco alive, using the very technology that sometimes threatens to diminish them. BAVC has helped to put storytelling

technology in the hands of San Francisco residents for forty years and plans to continue doing just that for the next forty. While BAVC began life as a local technical access center for video, it has grown into one of the most successful nonprofit production centers in the country. Over 10,000 *noncommercial* film, video, and new media programs have been produced at BAVC, including programs that have gone directly into the community to be used as information and organizing tools, and programs which are featured in major art museums and/or on national public broadcasting produced by artists and documentary makers.

Whether it comes in the form of learning to create videos or virtual reality, deciding on the appropriate career path or preserving the artistic legacy of other venerated institutions, there are many ways that San Francisco residents engage with and help to cultivate BAVC. From the 1970s until today, BAVC has acted as a steward for the sharing and saving of stories formed in San Francisco, ensuring that those unique stories find their place in the world and shape our collective memory of the City and its people.

[1] To see the GLBT Historical Society video shared with Bay Area Video Coalition, visit: <https://vimeo.com/183061868> Password: bavc2727