

## **Shout LGBTQ Film Festival: Birmingham, AL**

by Webb Robertson

The subject of this case study is the Shout LGBTQ Film Festival in Birmingham, Alabama. Shout features films that are thematically of interest to the LGBTQ community. Shout began in 2006 as a stand-alone event, coordinated and managed by the Sidewalk Film Festival. In 2010, Shout became a sub-festival under the umbrella of the Sidewalk Film Festival. Shout takes place during the Sidewalk Film Festival.

In 2005, two Sidewalk board members approached several members of the LGBTQ community in Birmingham to explore the possibility of establishing a special interest festival. An eleven member exploratory ad hoc committee, consisting of board members, staff, and LGBTQ community leaders was established. In 2006, the committee decided to establish Shout as a stand-alone festival and was responsible for raising the funds necessary to make it feasible. Sidewalk served as Shout's fiscal sponsor. The first Shout took place over two days in April of 2006. A single theatre was rented to screen 10 films over the two-day festival.

In 2009, a contingent of the eleven-member committee became interested in establishing Shout as an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. They approached the Sidewalk board of directors at a regularly scheduled meeting and their request was approved. Shortly thereafter, the committee voted six to five to gain independence from Sidewalk. After this process began, two members of the committee moved to different cities. After several discussions with board, staff, LGBTQ community leaders, and the nine-member committee, the issue of independence from Sidewalk was put to vote again. In December of 2009 the decision to remain under the umbrella of Sidewalk was made. However, the Sidewalk staff determined that there was insufficient time to organize a festival for April of 2010. For this reason, all parties involved decided to produce Shout concurrently with Sidewalk.

In 2010, Shout took place at a single venue during the Sidewalk Film Festival. It should be noted that the Sidewalk Film Festival takes place at eleven different venues in downtown Birmingham. Only two of these venues are intended for screening films – the rest are non-traditional venues, which gives Sidewalk a unique appeal. From the beginning, it has been a mission-specific goal of Sidewalk to assist in the revitalization of downtown Birmingham, which had largely been abandoned in the 1970's as white flight drove many businesses to the suburbs.

The choice to continue Shout from a single venue in 2010 led to an unexpected consequence: many members of the LGBTQ community felt isolated from the broader festival. After many discussions with the staff, board, and LGBTQ community members, it was determined that the Shout brand would be maintained as a sub-festival but that the films programmed for Shout would be screened at a variety of theatres.

Shout has become a vital part of Sidewalk's identity and an icon in Birmingham's LGBTQ community. In this sense, the process has been mutually beneficial to Sidewalk and the LGBTQ community. Shout is perhaps the only outwardly focused event acknowledging and honoring Birmingham's LGBTQ community. Shout has become thoroughly integrated in the milieu of Sidewalk. Today, many members of the LGBTQ community are represented on the Sidewalk board, staff, and among festival volunteers as well. Additionally, in 2015 Shout About Youth was established. This program serves approximately thirty metro area LGBTQ youths, providing them with access to the festival, transportation, and meals during the event.

In addition to the degree to which Shout has become integrated into Sidewalk, success is evaluated in terms of the normalization of the LGBTQ community and festival growth. Thirteen years ago, it was very difficult to get corporate sponsorship for Shout. Indeed, individuals and a limited number LGBTQ owned businesses provided most funding. While it would be incorrect to claim that there is no lingering hesitation among corporate sponsors, corporate sponsorship for Shout has increased by a factor of ten over the past five years. Additionally, since 2010 attendance and ticket sales have increased nearly four hundred percent. Finally, while the process used to realize Shout was not typical of community engagement, the outcomes are very consistent with its goals – particularly as it pertains to mutuality of benefit.

Relationship maintenance is achieved through a series of structural arrangements. As previously noted, the Shout Committee is comprised of leaders in the LGBTQ community who interact on a nearly constant basis with Sidewalk board and staff. Many Shout members serve as screeners (individuals who identify potential films for display during the Shout Festival) and assist the Sidewalk creative director with programmatic decisions. Additionally, over 150 Shout members volunteer at Sidewalk events such as professional development classes, networking events, and special interest

screenings that take place throughout the year. The relationship between Shout and Sidewalk is unusual in that there is a high degree of operational integration, yet each festival maintains a strong brand and institutional autonomy.

In assessing this unusual initiative, it is important to note that both Sidewalk and Shout were committed to the idea of an LGBTQ film festival in Birmingham from the beginning. Further, both organizations believed that an LGBTQ festival was particularly important in a politically conservative environment, such as Birmingham. Both organizations were flexible and attentive to each other throughout the process. This was especially true when Shout struggled to determine whether to remain a stand alone festival or to be incorporated as a sub-festival during Sidewalk.

In many respects, Shout is an exemplary initiative, which will serve as a template for future community engagement. Sidewalk is in the process of developing an independent cinema in Downtown Birmingham, which is scheduled to open in 2019. The facility will house two 100- seat theatres, as well as flex space for educational programming, professional development and networking events. This new development will enable Sidewalk to establish a variety of new mini-festivals and sub-festivals that will take place during the festival and throughout the year.

To accomplish this, Sidewalk is already in dialogue with several special interests communities in Birmingham. Among the lessons learned in the Shout experiment are the need for deep listening, shared intent, flexibility, compassion, and a commitment to cultural equity.