



AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Press Kit

TRT: 97 minutes



For all press inquiries, please contact:

Cinetic

Emilie Spiegel

emilie@cineticmedia.com

Meghan Kasel

meghan@cineticmedia.com

LOGLINE

With a lucky run at the track and chutzpah for days, Franco Stevens launched *Curve*, the best-selling lesbian magazine ever published. When Franco learns that *Curve* is failing, she turns to today's queer activists to determine her path forward.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

With a fist full of credit cards, a lucky run at the horse track and chutzpah for days, Franco Stevens launched *Curve*, the best-selling lesbian lifestyle magazine ever published. *AHEAD OF THE CURVE* traces the power of lesbian visibility and community from the early '90s to the present day through the story of Franco's founding of *Curve* magazine. Decades later, as her legacy faces extinction and she reassesses her life after a disabling injury, she sets out to understand work being led by queer Women of Color today. The film features Andrea Pino-Silva, Kim Katrin, Denice Frohman, Amber Hikes, Jewlle Gomeez, Melissa Etheridge, and Lea DeLaria, and the score is composed by the legendary Meshell Ndegeocello.

LONG SYNOPSIS

AHEAD OF THE CURVE is the story of one of the most influential women in lesbian history most people have never heard of and the impact her work continues to have today. The film opens with the revelation that Franco Stevens' life's work is in peril. Franco's story unfolds through intimate interviews with magazine staff, celebrities, cultural critics, and Franco herself intertwined with extraordinary footage from Franco's personal collection and LGBTQ archives to situate the story in its historical context. Franco's present-day struggle is told through verité handheld encounters with queer women leading today's intersectional work.

Franco Stevens realized she was gay and left her marriage in the late '80s, when many women lost their families and sometimes their lives for coming out. She was 20 years old, alone, working three jobs, and living out of her car. Driven to connect with the beautiful range of her new community, she conceived of a glossy magazine. Unable to find funding, Franco took out 12 credit cards in one day, cashed them out and went to the track. She won three races back to back and sunk every penny into her new magazine. Keeping the magazine afloat was a constant battle, but Franco understood the importance of representing the entirety of lesbian diversity and strived to help all lesbians connect with community. After a disabling injury which she largely kept secret, Franco sold the magazine and nearly 30 years later, it continues to make lesbians more visible to one another and to the general population.

When the current publisher reaches out to let Franco know the magazine will fold within a year, she faces a crisis. She's been away from the helm for nearly 10 years. Should she - and can she - rally the community to keep the magazine going? Is it the magazine or the mission that matters most at this point in the evolving fight for lesbian visibility? Franco struggles to

determine the relevance of her own voice given her physical stamina and the vulnerability that raising her own voice now engenders.

In a deeply personal bid to find the answers she needs, Franco reaches out to some of the young women leading in today's queer spaces. When a major queer women's conference invites her to join a panel titled Lesbian vs. Queer - Do the Words We Use Matter, she wonders out loud if anyone will even show up. Franco is stunned when the room fills to capacity with a crowd who values her contribution and wants to hear her perspective now. She connects with fellow panel member, National Center for Lesbian Rights Communications Director Andrea Pino, who acts as a sounding board and guide for Franco's new journey.

As Franco struggles to understand the relevance of her magazine now, she reaches out to educator Kim Katrin, slam poet Denice Frohman, cultural leader Amber Hikes, and a host of young queer people to learn about where lesbian community is today. Kim shares the powerful cultural shift in which queer women and Women of Color are increasingly taking power as she says, "ideally, visibility looks like us being able to be the authors of our own experience and to be able to tell our own stories. I'm committed to making sure that generations in the future see more visibility, more freedom than what we have access to now." Denice talks about how important it is that we feel connected to a lineage of strong queer women as she calls out how she is "reminded every day about my predecessors, the giants that really paved the way for any of the work that we're able to do. I would not be here if it wasn't for the work of Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga in particular, and Tatiana De La Tierra." Then Amber, who introduced the black and brown stripes into the rainbow flag, calls on the LGBTQ community to work more intersectionally as she says, "white folks in the LGBTQ community have, I mean, that's how privilege works, you were able to ignore it for so long. And so, now it's fine, yell at me and tell me racism doesn't exist, but at least you're talking about it!" Andrea points out that "when there is so much at stake right now, our positive stories are some of the most powerful tools that we have. Now is the time to go to that 8am march on a Saturday, to vote in every single election, to run for office if you feel like you can, to speak up, to share your story. This is what makes our visibility so powerful."

With the imminent demise of her magazine bearing down, Franco worries that she isn't physically able to help and questions whether the community still needs *Curve*. Her approach to threats and erasure in the '90s was to lift lesbians up and make them beautifully visible. Through her magazine, she helped to lay the groundwork for intersectional movements being led by today's activists in the face of accelerating threats to the LGBTQ community. Ultimately, Franco reconnects with her original mission and plans to launch the Curve Foundation to help amplify queer women's voices and share their stories.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I consider myself a late bloomer. I knew I was queer at 14, but I was alone and didn't feel safe to come out. It wasn't until my late 30's and a difficult divorce that I found my community. If I had found *Deneuve* and connected to community earlier, my life would have been very different. I could have started living more authentically so much sooner. But I might not have found my way to marry Franco Stevens, which has become the foundational relationship of my life.

Franco's contribution to the lesbian community inspires me, and it vexes me that like so many stories of influential queer women, her story is largely unknown. I feel a deep responsibility to tell Franco's story as completely and honestly as possible to honor my community and our rich history, and to tell the story of a strong female role model who, in manifesting her own dream, made space for hundreds of thousands of others to have a chance at theirs. I want young women seeing this film to find a model for how to meet the needs of the community by meeting their own needs. I want these audiences, who are hungry to know our movement's history and lineage, to be inspired to look within themselves to understand their own value and what they need, then to use their voices and act, just as Franco did.

I am worried that our society is becoming increasingly fractured. After a remarkable decade of progress under Obama, our current administration has stirred conflict and division, and has taken steps to roll back protections for LGBTQ people. Just as many believed racism was gone because we elected a Black president, many believe that LGBTQ people have full rights since we got marriage equality. Neither could be further from the truth. Both assumptions connect to deep societal change work that we need to be doing now. Discrimination in the workplace, in the military, and even in the bathroom is being legislated. Under the Trump administration, the Justice Department has gone out of its way to say the law should not evolve further in the direction of gay rights. This matters because the quality of our lives — and even our lives themselves — depend both on our civil rights and on the perception by broader society of the value of our lives.

Within the gay community, I see that many people — mostly younger generations — are chafing against the words we use to describe ourselves. The label LGBT calls out only lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and does not perfectly reflect genderqueer people, intersex people, asexual people, pansexual people, polyamorous people and those questioning their sexuality or gender, to name just a few. And acronyms such as LGBTQIP2SAA are so unwieldy that they further fracture, rather than unite the community. The current conversations stress our differences and leave many people feeling unheard and disconnected. I want young queer women to better understand the history of the words we use and to open to conversations with their elders.

The people who live the spectrum of these identities everyday are the experts, and yet they are often systematically excluded from decision making about how their lives and communities are addressed or represented. Engaging with an all female / female-identified crew across a

spectrum of identities, races, and ages to craft this film was a joyful step toward healing and reuniting our community.

Franco's magazine was born in a time when writing the word "lesbian" on the cover of a publication was a triumph. The film is an uplifting story of the triumph of an underdog, and a reminder of a time, less than 30 years ago, when simply having a publication that reflects at least some part of a queer woman's life in a positive and affirming light was deeply powerful and empowering. In a world where visibility does not yet equal safety, the need for positive stories about queer women has never been stronger. Representing a spectrum of our stories, both to ourselves and to dominant culture, is one of our most powerful tools to forge a world that is safer and more equitable for all.

- **Jen Rainin**, director & co-producer

FRANCO'S STORY

What made *Curve* magazine (first published in 1990 as *Deneuve*) ahead of its time wasn't just the radical choice to boldly print "lesbian" on the cover next to out and proud figureheads such as Melissa Etheridge, Wanda Sykes and k.d. lang. *Curve* was filled with diverse, unapologetic images and stories that radiated community and dignity from cover to cover, quickly becoming a cornerstone of lesbian culture. So in 2019 when founder Franco Stevens heard that the magazine might go out of print, she was left with two questions: Was a lesbian magazine still important for lesbian visibility? And, how had visibility changed over three decades?

In *AHEAD OF THE CURVE*, filmmakers Jen Rainin and Rivkah Beth Medow craft a personal journey that follows Stevens' process of grappling with questions of community and legacy. Linking lesbian histories with contemporary viewpoints, the film moves between interviews with LGBTQ+ activists and tastemakers, "celesbians" (including Jewelle Gomez, Kate Kendell, and LeaDeLaria) and rich archival footage. Rainin lovingly uplifts the personal and political struggles, adventure, and community that birthed an institution, honoring its visionary legacy while exploring whether a groundbreaking print publication remains relevant in a digital age.

—**Sophia Lanza-Weil**

SUBJECT BACKGROUND

Our culture is in the midst of a significant cultural shift around women and People of Color. Queer women, Women of Color, and non-binary folk are leading — as they always have — even as our government unleashes a barrage of anti-LGBTQ legislation aimed at rolling back our hard-won gains and erasing recognition and protection of LGBTQ people entirely. Visibility and

representation are the most powerful tools in existence to protect LGBTQ folk, and Franco Stevens knew this 30 years ago. Her work helped move the nation forward socially and politically by creating space, visibility, and empathy for anyone who identified as lesbian.

Lesbian culture evolved from strict butch/femme identity in the '50s, to the '70s/'80s when it became taboo to express femininity, to the '90s when women began to embrace the full range of what lesbians could look like. Franco's magazine, originally named *Deneuve*, both propelled and charted this growth. From the get-go the magazine created a radically inclusive atmosphere for change.

Despite this evolution within the community, the '90s were an extraordinarily difficult time to be queer. Not only did lesbians face discrimination at work and at home throughout the US, it was dangerous to be out in many places. The politics at the time were "don't ask don't tell," and many women lost their jobs, their homes, their children, and in some cases their lives. Rebecca Wight was killed in 1988, when she and her partner, Claudia Brenner, were shot by a man while camping along the Appalachian Trail who claimed he was enraged by lesbians. Jewelle Gomez recalls, "It was nothing to walk down the street holding hands with another woman and have somebody smack you."

Mainstream films like *PHILADELPHIA*, *IN AND OUT*, and *HIGH ART* helped make LGBTQ lives and relationships more visible to the general population. Ellen Degeneres came out on a grand scale in 1997, enduring the loss of her network show, years of being ostracized in Hollywood, and even death threats. Many celebrities have since come out and been lauded for their courage. While this is indeed progress, the attention given to these revelations underscores that homosexuality is still considered abnormal. The gains queer folk made came out of the effort to present LGBTQ lives to the heterosexual population. As the only mainstream magazine that was for and about lesbians, *Deneuve* made lesbians more visible both to each other and, crucially, to the mainstream.

Society has come a long way since Franco launched her magazine, but we are facing strong backlash. The current administration eliminated all content relating to LGBTQ people from the White House website and removed data collection plans regarding sexual orientation and gender identity from the National Census. The president signed into law an Executive Order which provides a license-to-discriminate against queer people based on religious beliefs, which are privileged above individual human rights. The Department of Justice now asserts that our nation's civil rights laws do not apply to LGBTQ people, and government workers are combing through landmark civil rights laws to remove protections wherever possible for LGBTQ people. Murders of transgender women, and particularly transgender women of color are on the rise. The number of anti-LGBTQ appointments to both our courts and cabinet positions is chilling.

In the face of these accelerating threats, today's young activists are picking up where Franco left off. Modern visibility work looks like the work done by Kim Katrin, Denice Frohman, Andrea Pino-Silva, and Amber Hikes and it flourishes when queer women gather in community groups and through conferences like Lesbians Who Tech and Clexacon. At the heart of this visibility work are

the twin truths of radical self-love and the idea that you must be able to “see it to be it.” These stories weave through the film to connect the intersectional visibility that Franco fought for through her magazine nearly 30 years ago with the creative, provocative incarnations of visibility work today.

FEATURED CAST BIOS & HEADSHOTS



FRANCO STEVENS

Franco Stevens founded the most successful lesbian magazine in the world, raising lesbian visibility in a way that connected the lesbian community, created the lesbian market for advertisers, helped the lesbian community accept femme-identifying lesbians, changed the way lesbians are seen by the mainstream, highlighted the transgender experience, brought attention to lesbian families, raised awareness of attacks on LGBT rights, and amplified the work of lesbian activists.



KIM KATRIN

Kim Katrin is an award winning internationally acclaimed educator, writer & artist. She has been recognized as one of The Root's "Young Feminists to Watch," and celebrated in Canada as 2016's [National Youth Role Model](#) and nationally as one of the [50 Most Loved Gay Canadians](#). Kim speaks at universities and contributes to the press throughout Canada and the US about human rights and equity issues.



DENICE FROHMAN

Denice Frohman is an award-winning poet, educator, performer and speaker. She has been commissioned by The Met, ESPN and Twitter. She has been a featured speaker at over 200 colleges and universities; and hundreds of K-12 schools, community arts spaces, nonprofits, detention centers, and conferences, including The White House. As a queer, mixed Latina woman, her work explores the tension between the stories we tell about ourselves, the ones told about us, and the ones we tell about each other.



ANDREA PINO-SILVA

Author, speaker, unapologetic storyteller, and fearless advocate for survivors of sexual assault and LGBTQ People of Color, Andrea is committed to bringing together grassroots organizing and radical storytelling to build intersectional, accessible social movements from the National Center for Lesbian Rights to End Rape on Campus. The daughter of Cuban refugees, Andrea’s activism has been featured in the NYTimes, Vogue, CNN, Good Morning America, Huffpost, and Bill Maher. Her journey is featured in the Emmy-award winning THE HUNTING GROUND (Sundance 2015).



AMBER HIKES

Amber Hikes is a social justice advocate, community organizer, and unapologetic queer Black woman. As the ACLU’s first Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer, she provides vision, leadership, and direction for the ACLU’s nationwide strategy to support equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) across all aspects of the organization’s work and efforts. Amber serves as both the internal and external ambassador on the importance of EDI as a crucial cornerstone of the ACLU’s culture of belonging.

FILMMAKER BIOS & HEADSHOTS



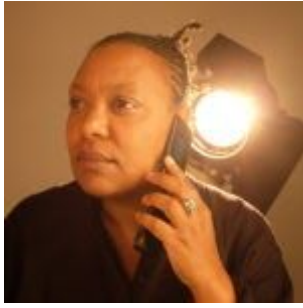
JEN RAININ — director & co-producer

Jen Rainin’s work in film is focused on building community, deepening understanding of social justice issues, and telling great stories. Her EP credits include STAGE LEFT (2011), TWO SPIRITS (2009), SHIT & CHAMPAGNE (2020, SFIFF), and HOMEROOM (in production). AHEAD OF THE CURVE is her directorial debut, and the inaugural film for Frankly Speaking Films.



RIVKAH BETH MEDOW — producer & co-director

Rivkah Beth Medow produces and directs character-driven films that deepen social or ecological connections and build community. Her credits include SONS OF A GUN (2009; PBS); BEING GEORGE CLOONEY (2016; Netflix); THE NINE by Katy Grannan (2016, Festivals); and THE NEXT FRONTIER (2010, PBS). Rivkah and Jen formed Frankly Speaking Films to create films that center strong queer women’s stories to increase visibility and empathy.



MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO – Composer

Meshell Ndegeocello is an authentic musical thinker and an uncompromising artist. A bass player above all else, Meshell brings her warm, fat, and melodic groove to everything she does and has appeared alongside the Rolling Stones, Madonna, Alanis Morissette, James Blood Ulmer, The Blind Boys of Alabama, Tony Allen, John Medeski, Billy Preston, and Chaka Khan. Meshell's composing credits include QUEEN SUGAR and THE HOUSE ON COCO ROAD.



LINDSEY DRYDEN – executive producer

Lindsey Dryden is an Emmy®-winning filmmaker, a proud founding member of Queer Producers Collective and FWD-DOC, and a fellow of BAFTA/BFI Flare, Guiding Lights, Good Pitch and HotDocs Forum. She produced UNREST (2017; PBS, Netflix) and TRANS IN AMERICA (2018; SXSW, Conde Nast), and her directing credits include LOST AND SOUND (2012; SXSW) and JACKIE KAY: ONE PERSON, TWO NAMES (2017, Tate Queer British Art).

JESSICA CONGDON – Editor

Jessica Congdon's credits include the award-winning feature-length documentary DOLORES (Sundance 2017). She produced, wrote and edited the documentary films THE MASK YOU LIVE IN (Sundance 2015) and MISS REPRESENTATION (Sundance 2011) with Jennifer Siebel Newsom.

SVETLANA CVETKO – Cinematographer

Svetlana Cvetko is an award-winning cinematographer with a dual focus in documentary and fiction. Her credits include INSIDE JOB, which received the 2011 Academy Award for Best Documentary, INEQUALITY FOR ALL (Sundance 2013), and RED ARMY (Cannes 2014).

Q&A WITH FILMMAKERS Jen Rainin & Rivkah Beth Medow

1. Why did you begin filming?

J - When I married Franco, I knew she had started *Curve* but I didn't know the whole history. Over the first years of our marriage, she would drop little nuggets in my lap about cashing out 12 credit cards in one day and betting everything at the racetrack to fund the magazine, or going to loansharks to make payroll, or being sued by Catherine Deneuve. I realized this was a fantastic story that would make a terrific narrative film, so I set about writing a screenplay. But as I researched, I quickly realized how little of queer women's history has been documented and saw the importance of documenting this piece of lesbian history accurately. So I began filming the historical story.

R - When I joined the film Jen had already been thinking deeply about this story and done a ton of pre-interviews with all the women who helped start *Curve*. The Trump administration had recently been voted into office and begun dismantling the progress made over the past 30 years which led to several conversations about why this story needed to be told now. We talked about our core values around community, how Franco built community to meet her own needs, and in doing so met the needs of her community; and this story could be critical to building community power that can continue to cultivate extraordinary change.

2. How were you changed by the process of making AHEAD OF THE CURVE?

J - In the middle of filming, Franco got a call from the current owner of *Curve* letting her know that the magazine was in trouble. It sent Franco down a new path to learn what today's queer women need. That really opened my eyes to the activism happening today, and awakened a desire to carry on the work that Franco started, but through a philanthropic structure. As a result, Franco and I are now committed to building the Curve Foundation to lift up queer women's voices and tell their stories.

The other big awakening for both Franco and me during the filming process was realizing that since we got marriage equality, most folks assume that we have equal rights across the board. WE DO NOT. The anti-LGBTQ movement has never let up. In more than half the country, you can *still* be fired, evicted, or denied public services just for being gay. And in the last two years, more than 350 anti-LGBTQ bills have been introduced at the state level across the nation, and there are more in the pipeline.

3. What were the values imbued in making this film, and where do those values come from?

J - The film is infused with the values that called Franco to start, and to fight for her magazine. Our core values of community, visibility, and justice shape our work. It was important to us to work with an all female-identified crew, just as Franco did. It was important for us to lift up and celebrate all the different ways that queer women present in the world, just as Franco did. It is important for us to tell a story that brings different generations together to continue the fight for our rights.

R - Like Kim Katrin says in our film, we believe in “being the authors of our own experiences”. People who live the spectrum of these experiences are the experts even as they’re often excluded from decisions around how their lives and communities are represented. As filmmakers we have both agency and responsibility around representation - in this film that meant being part of the community we highlight, contextualizing this story within a history that connected to movements and relevance today, and building a diverse team of advisors who could help us see around our blind spots was crucial. We believe that the way we tell stories is as meaningful as the stories we tell, so telling this story and following Franco’s model around inclusivity offered a huge opportunity for us to contribute to an even more expansive and intersectional vision of the community.

4. What challenges did you face during the making of AHEAD OF THE CURVE?

R - You mean besides the challenges around finding good gluten-free craft service in Gainesville, Florida or managing crew feelings around the Kavanaugh appointment? For real though - we had committed to working with an all female-identified crew which meant booking crews earlier and occasionally having to fly them to places where we couldn’t find female crew. It also meant really investing in mentoring younger women and taking a genuine interest in helping them along their own path as filmmakers, which I don’t think of as a challenge so much as just the way all sets should be but usually weren’t in my experience as a younger filmmaker.

The biggest challenges were around providing a thorough, entertaining, and nuanced history of *Curve* while expanding the space in the film to tell current, pressing stories about queer and lesbian women so that more women could see themselves reflected in the story. Lesbians and queer women are not a monolithic community, and we wanted to listen to and amplify community voices and help grow the grassroots power that are core parts of both Franco’s work and ours as filmmakers. Fortunately we have an Impact Campaign around the film that will help us engage in a collaborative process with partners, community, leaders, and organizations so the film can join conversations that help increase power for queer and lesbian women everywhere.

5. What do you hope audiences will take away from the film?

J & R - If people walk away from this film knowing this story and better understanding the history and lineage of LGBTQ+ women, thinking about what’s at stake for LGBTQ+ people in elections, we will have done our jobs! We audiences to feel excited about connecting with The Curve Foundation to empower queer women to connect with each other, share our stories, and raise visibility. Making this film deepened our belief that visibility in media is the most powerful tool to create a world where all queer women are valued. As a result, we have launched a production company, [Frankly Speaking Films](#), focusing on authentic storytelling to address the deep need for representation of queer women’s stories.

6. What was the genesis of this film? Why did you feel like you wanted to tell this story?

J: When I married Franco, I knew she had started Curve but I didn't know the whole history. In the first years of our marriage, she would drop little nuggets in my lap about cashing out 12 credit cards in one day and betting everything at the racetrack to fund the magazine, or going to loan sharks to make payroll, or being sued by Catherine Deneuve. I realized this was a fantastic story that would make a terrific narrative film, so I set about writing a screenplay. But as I researched, I quickly realized how little of queer women's history has been well documented and saw the importance of documenting this piece of lesbian history accurately. So I began filming the historical story.

The Trump administration had recently been voted into office and begun dismantling the progress made over the past 30 years, which got us thinking about broadening the story to include more historical context and lit a fire around why this story needed to be told now. When Franco got the call from the current publisher about the magazine's imminent demise, it was a complicated gift which turned out to be the key to unlock the film. It gave us a path to connect Franco's journey with the phenomenal intersectional work that queer women like Amber Hikes, Kim Katrin, Denice Frohman, and Andrea Pino-Silva are doing today and to tell that story alongside the historical story.

7. When did you discover Curve and what did it mean to your own life?

J: I consider myself a late bloomer. I knew I was queer at 14, but I was alone and didn't feel safe to come out. It wasn't until my late 30's that I found Curve. I was finally starting to come out and I wanted to see people like me, so I steeled myself and showed up at SF Dyke March. I was too shy to join the party at Dolores Park, so I sipped chardonnay in a café on the march path and waited. When I looked up and saw the march had started, I was drawn to the sidewalk with tears streaming down my face. The power of seeing thousands of queer women – women just like me – was breathtaking.

That's exactly the experience we've heard over and over in making AHEAD OF THE CURVE, from women describing what Curve meant to them. If I had found Curve and connected to community earlier, my life would have been very different. I could have started living more authentically so much sooner. But I might not have found my way to marry Franco, which has become the foundational relationship of my life.

I feel a deep responsibility to tell Franco's story as completely and honestly as possible to honor the lesbian community and its rich history, to tell the story of a strong female role model who, in manifesting her own dream, made space for hundreds of thousands of others to have a chance at theirs, and perhaps most importantly to contribute to an understanding of how positive change must be fought for on multiple fronts and in deeply creative ways. We assembled an all female-identified crew to create AHEAD OF

THE CURVE to engage a community that remains hungry to learn more of its own history and celebrate the heroes who made us more visible and on whose shoulders we stand today.

8. What do you feel the legacy of Curve is?

J & R: OUTFEST described this when they said, "The spectrum of Lesbian visibility in America breaks down into two timelines: Before and After Curve Magazine." Curve built lesbian visibility in a way that connected the community, created the lesbian market for advertisers, helped the community accept femme-identifying lesbians while celebrating butch and non-binary women and highlighting the transgender experience. The magazine amplified the work of all manner of queer female activists and brought out conversations around lesbian marriage and families, attacks on LGBTQ rights - issues that were then picked up by mainstream media and thereby really shifted the way we are seen by the mainstream. Ultimately, Curve serves as a curator of lesbian and queer women's culture, celebrating LGBTQ women in the myriad ways they show up in our world.

FULL CREDITS [can be found here](#)