

# On the importance of cultivating an authentic community



Director Anna Baumgarten discusses imposter syndrome, getting enough sleep, and being proud of what you make.

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As told to Lexi Lane, 2073 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [TV](#), [Collaboration](#), [Inspiration](#), [Mental health](#), [Mentorship](#).

**Your debut feature film, *Disfluency*, centers around Jane, who returns from college and is coming to terms with trauma. It also stemmed from your own experience at a similar age. Did you approach the script first or what was that starting process like?**

It started as a short film that I wrote and I wasn't sure if I was going to make it. I was just working through my own experience. We ended up making the short. People were excited about it and starting to ask if we were going to make a feature version, and I was like, "[I] have not thought about that." It was not a goal to make this a feature beforehand, but two things happened. One, we got into The Short to Feature Lab, which is run by Benjamin Wiessner and Jim Cummings. And then two, there was this fundraising competition on Seed&Spark called Hometown Heroes that the Duplass brothers were running.

The short takes place during college. I was like, "I can shoot this after school in the summer. I like that version of this story. I like seeing Jane in the warm blanket of her summer home." The Short to Feature Lab helped me start looking at it like a full feature and how to achieve everything from getting the story there to distribution.

**What was the biggest thing you learned from that experience that you applied to *Disfluency*?**

I was not planning on directing it or I was deciding if I was going to direct it. I had written and produced the short film. I have a lot of imposter syndrome around directing. My thesis in college was directing, so I knew to an extent what I was doing, but I was talking to them, and Ben and Jim and Danny Madden, who was also there were just very... They were like, "Anna, of course, you can direct this. Just direct it." I know that sounds like a little thing, but it was so important for me to hear that I could direct from other people.

The other big thing that I learned is that indie films are businesses. Indie films are like startup companies. You get your LLC. You get your investors. There's contracts. There's follow-through, It really is like starting up a little company every single time you do it, which when it comes to short filmmaking, you're probably not going to get your money back. It's for the love of the game.

**You write, you produce, you direct—do you find it difficult to balance all of that? Or does it come naturally?**

I would say it's always a challenge to wear multiple hats. In some ways, that chaos is my comfort zone. In short film worlds, I've produced most of the things I've directed and written, so I've worn all the hats at once. When it came to this feature, Danny was really good about the week we were about to shoot. He was great about pushing me out and saying, "Hey, you're a director now. I'm going to do the rest of this. You don't need to look at your

emails. You don't need to be worrying about this."

Another great gift he gave me was he made sure I got eight hours of sleep every night, which was... A lot of people are very affected by sleep, and famously, people don't get sleep on indie projects. But him taking the reins and me handing my hat to him, basically, my producer hat, and him taking over and having that clear line once everything started was great.

**I read that you were able to tailor the script for Libe [Barer, who plays Jane] and her sister, Ariela. Did you find it easier to craft the dialogue and aspects of the film to their strengths or what was that collaboration process like?**

I had worked with Libe as a producer on the short. It was helpful to know that Libe was in the lead role and to be writing a role for her sister, who I'd met a couple of times, but I didn't know Ariela super well at the time. I do find that if you have... If you're just writing a script on spec, if you put certain talent, certain actors in your head, like celebrities, whoever it is, it can really help you find specificities a little bit easier. The short answer is yes, it was really helpful to know those two were playing those characters and write to their strengths.

**What was the most rewarding part about making *Disfluency* or even the reception to it so far?**

Making your first feature, I expected it to feel like I was totally out of my element and didn't know what I was doing, but if a short's a sprint, a feature's a marathon, and it's all running. I learned to trust myself. I think all of the knowledge that I've gained throughout this process, I feel like I have a whole skill set and I'm excited to share it with filmmakers who haven't made their first feature. Mentorship is a really big thing to me, but there's so many things that have come out of *Disfluency*.

We didn't have a huge budget. We weren't wooing people with big paychecks or anything like that. People were truly on this for the story. To have crew members who've read the script, cast who've read this script and say, "I want to tell this story with you, whatever it takes," or "I read this and I cried, I want to be a part of this. How can I be a part of this?" People looking at me and believing in my story and believing in this work was so wonderful. I want to now give that to other creatives and other survivors, too. That was the most validating, cathartic feeling for me in the world, was to put a version of my story on paper and have it be received so beautifully and supportively.

**You've mentioned growing up in Michigan. Were there films or even shows that led you to know you wanted to make your own or know you wanted to write? What was that artistic journey for you growing up?**

I watched a lot more TV than I did movies growing up. My family is a Catholic Midwest family. I wasn't allowed to watch a lot of PG-13 or R, even in high school, so it was limiting and limiting to what I could sneak watch on TV. *Kiki's Delivery Service* [and] *Princess Bride* were two of my all-time favorites, but I also grew up watching a lot of *SpongeBob* and *Powerpuff Girls*, so those for sure. *Big Fish* is a big one for me, too. Those are the movies that made me want to tell stories.

There are definitely films that have been made in Michigan. They weren't the most influential when I was younger. I graduated in 2015. The few years prior to that, Michigan had I think the best film incentives in the country, so a lot of film projects were coming there. *Five-Year Engagement*, *Love and Honor*, there was a *Batman* movie that shot here. Ryan Gosling shot his first movie here. *Lost River* is what I'm thinking of and *Ides of March*.

We had a robust film community starting and that was so cool to see. By the time I had graduated, they had gone from the best film incentives to no film incentives. That forced everyone to figure other things out. If you weren't working in commercials, which Detroit still has a pretty good commercial market, you had to move. I moved out to LA. I love Michigan so much and I still want to continue filming there. It's just hard to convince folks sometimes because you don't have the same financial or vendor resources you do in other states.

**What piece of advice would you give to someone who's just starting in the industry or even to your younger self?**

This is an industry where the word networking comes up a lot. Networking events, "I have to go network," all of this stuff. The truth is it's making friends. It's finding people that you click with and work well with. It's connecting with people that are at your level. It's like all ships rise as opposed to, "I need to get a meeting with this fancy person, or if I talk to the head of the network, I'm going to get a job." It's meeting the people that are at your level and building your community. It's community building. It's creating real formative connections because I just feel like building your Rolodex feels so daunting and people... Reframing your mind around that and really reaching out to people that you admire and want to learn from is always helpful. It never hurts to ask, I don't think. I also want to tell my younger self to chill out a little bit and trust myself and my work.

**I can't imagine LA and networking.**

It's just a lot. There's opportunity for it and knowing that you don't have to do everything, but when you do go out, putting your all into it, and really trying to form those genuine connections and make friends and talk about your favorite movies and TV shows. That's why we're all here, the love of the game.

**Do you have a daily routine at all that helps you maintain focus?**

I'm looking for one because I've been traveling so much to go to screenings, film festivals, [and] conferences. We've been doing a school tour with the movie. I just started contacting Title IX departments at universities and saying, "Hey, do you want to bring in this movie and me as a speaker?" I went to 15 universities last year around the country. All of that to say is, I'm looking forward to being in one place for more than two weeks and settling more into a routine. Something helpful for me is communicating with friends and setting goals and telling them what I'm going to do. I'm in a writer's group, so I do have deadlines for my features, so that's been helpful. In terms of a daily routine, it's a little different in every hotel room that I'm in.

I would say not having too high of expectations of myself. What I mean by that is I'll go to new cities and I want to explore and go see this and that, but I know that I really need to get to bed by this time and I really don't need a cocktail and I just need to focus up on keeping my health a priority has been really big. Somehow, going from Michigan to Salt Lake City for Sundance to New York, back to Michigan, to Oklahoma City, to LA, I have not gotten sick, so I am grateful for that. I will say it is a challenge, but just fitting in work where I can. I work well at airports, which is nice. And having partners who are flexible, business partners, and willing to be on the fly with me.

**Is there a moment or a memory even at any point in your career, whether it's *Disfluency* or something else that you're the most proud of so far?**

Oh, what a lovely question. I am the most proud of *Disfluency*. I am most proud of the people I've surrounded myself with. It's so weird to talk about a film and say my film or my movie or whatever it is, because it's not, it's ours. A hundred plus people have touched this film at this point in its creation. There's no way I could have done this on my own, nor would I have wanted to, and I'm so proud of everyone on my team. Pride and gratitude go hand in hand for me, so that's where that lies.

**Anna Baumgarten recommends:**

An annual appointment with your dermatologist to get your moles checked

Telling the stories that ask to be told, the ones that you wake up thinking about...the ones that won't leave you alone

FIOVER Gel Pens

Grabbing tickets to the Alabama Shakes 2025 Reunion Tour

Supporting your local community theater

Name

Anna Baumgarten

Vocation

director

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