

Filmmakers Invited to Submit Entries for Inaugural Little Fort Film Festival in 2026

Festival aims to spark conversation and action on behalf of the environment

WAUKEGAN, IL, UNITED STATES, February 13, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Little Fort [Film Festival](#) is now accepting submissions for its inaugural event, a celebration of the power of environmental filmmaking to educate, entertain and motivate action.

It will take place June 20-21, 2026, in Waukegan, Illinois, situated north of Chicago on the shores of Lake Michigan.

The film festival will be set against the backdrop of the Great Lakes, the largest body of fresh water on Earth. This vital resource, holding 6 quadrillion gallons of water -- or one-fifth of the globe's fresh water supply -- is larger than the United Kingdom.



Susan L. Kelsey

“

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“Film has the unique ability to connect us emotionally and intellectually to the issues that matter most,” said festival co-director Maryllene Blondell, an internationally recognized filmmaker who grew up near Lake Michigan and now lives in Chicago.

“Through the Little Fort Film Festival, we aim to bring together filmmakers, environmental advocates and communities for creative storytelling and to speak about and explore innovative solutions for safeguarding our

world,” she said.

Blondell's partner is author Susan L. Kelsey of Lake Forest, who entered the filmmaking world with her documentary, “The Negotiator: Billy Caldwell.” The film recounted the story of Caldwell, a man of Irish and Mohawk parentage who became known as Chief Sauganash and negotiated historic treaties that resulted in Native American tribes leaving the state of Illinois and moving west.

The film, which Kelsey produced with members of the Potawatomi community, had its world premiere in 2024 and won recognition from several film festivals.

Kelsey said she was inspired to launch an environmental film festival because she loves to swim, especially in chilly Lake Michigan. "I was looking at the lakefront in Waukegan and thought, 'How beautiful.' I wondered what I could do to inspire other people to realize and appreciate this tremendous asset."

The festival invites filmmakers to submit productions from feature films and documentaries to short films and animated works. Kelsey and Blondell also encourage high school and college students to create films for entry into the festival.



Maryllene Blondell

"I know from my own children that there is a concern about the environment," Kelsey said. "This festival is one of hope. We want people to know we can make a difference."

The festival has already been booked into three venues, garnered support from several sponsors, and has the endorsement of Ann B. Taylor, mayor of Waukegan.

"The Little Fort Film Festival represents exactly the kind of cultural renaissance we're building in Waukegan," Taylor said. "As we prepare to welcome filmmakers and audiences to our lakefront city in June 2026, we're not just hosting a festival -- we're showcasing Waukegan's commitment to becoming a vibrant arts destination on the shores of Lake Michigan.

"This bilingual, inclusive event across three venues perfectly embodies our city's spirit of innovation and resiliency."

The festival is named for Waukegan's original name, Little Fort. "It was an important harbor," Kelsey said, "a 'little fort' that protected the north end of Chicago as fur traders were coming along the Great Lakes." Founded in 1849 as Waukegan (taken from the Potawatomi word for "fortress"), it grew into a satellite city of Chicago and major manufacturing hub, with a population of around 90,000.

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Submissions are open through April 30, 2026. Filmmakers can visit the festival's website, LittleFortFilmFestival.org for submission guidelines and instructions. The two-day event will include screenings, panel discussions and special events designed to engage audiences and foster connections between creators and viewers, as well as special musical guests who are aligned with environmental causes

Sponsorships and memberships are also available in the festival, which is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Current sponsors include the City of Waukegan, Genesee Theater, Three Brothers Theatre, Waukegan History Museum at the Carnegie and Marriott Townplace Suites Waukegan/Gurnee.

The Little Fort Film Festival is the brainchild of two Chicago-area filmmakers, Maryilene Blondell and Susan Kelsey, and it is being held in a most unexpected location: Waukegan. Blondell, a Chicago native, has produced both large- and small-scale entertainment, environmental, musical and television projects in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. Her film, "Road Dance" (2021) premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, winning the Audience Award for Best Film. Her most recent project, "Rise Above: The Carl Jackson Story" (2024), is an eight-time Official Selection and won Best Documentary Feature at the Cannes Indie International Film Festival. Author and filmmaker Kelsey, a former marketing executive, spent years researching the origins of Chicago's Sauganash neighborhood and the region's fractious relationship with Native American tribes. Her film, "The Negotiator: Billy Caldwell," premiered in 2024.

For more information, visit LittleFortFilmFestival.org.

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