

# Claire Sliney on Inspiring Change through Her Oscar-winning Documentary

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*This is a story about confronting what some see as a cringe-worthy topic head-on – and, as a result, inspiring real change.*

*When she was in high school a few years back, Claire Sliney co-founded The Pad Project with the mission that “a period should end a sentence, not a girl’s education.” The nonprofit worked to demolish the stigma around menstruation that often forced young women (many who didn’t have access to menstrual products) to miss school or days of work. The Pad Project social impact goal is to change the narrative of girls being disempowered and devalued by providing them with tools to fight stigmas surrounding menstruation.*

*Sliney’s Pad Project has evolved into a movement. In 2014, she and a group of collaborators, began work on “Period.End of Sentence,” a documentary set in India to raise awareness about this women’s health issue. It has worked – and then some. In February 2019, Sliney and her team won the Academy Award for the best documentary short film.*

*Sliney, co-executive producer on the film and a University of Pennsylvania junior studying philosophy, politics and economics, sat down with KWHS interviewer Emmie Stratakis to talk about her ongoing fight to destroy the menstruation stigma, and what it feels like to be part of an Oscar-winning project.*

**Knowledge@Wharton High School:** Today KWHS welcomes a very special guest. Claire Sliney, an undergraduate student in the College of Arts and Sciences here at Penn, won an Oscar at the 2019 Academy Awards last year. She was an executive producer of a movie called “Period.End of Sentence.” It won in the category of Best Short Documentary. It’s actually available now for view on Netflix.

Hi, Claire. Could you talk a little bit about your movie documentary? What was it about?

**Claire Sliney:** “Period.End of Sentence” is set in a small village called Kathikhera, which is just outside of Delhi in India. It’s centered around a subject of women in a community where access to menstrual products is really challenging. And when women and girls can’t access these menstrual products that they need when they bleed every month, they inevitably end up stopping their education and stop going to school because they don’t have the products they need to change in the middle of the day. That’s directly tied to this larger idea that periods are stigmatized in a lot of cultures, not even just in India, but also around the world — even in our own local communities. And so, “Period.End of Sentence” follows the installation of a sanitary pad machine that helps bridge that gap between access to menstrual products and this community of women in Kathikhera, and then also helps start the dialogue about access to menstrual products and about periods in general, to get the conversation going and to ultimately try to diminish or destroy that stigma entirely.

**KWHS:** And how did you get involved in this project? Did it take you to Hollywood and give you an inside look into the movie industry?

**Sliney:** It actually started years ago. When I was a freshman in high school, I was a part of this club centered around access to education and women’s empowerment. We would meet every Tuesday and just talk about social issues. There was a point at which students went to the U.N., to the Commission on the Status of Women and learned about this issue of menstrual inequality, lack of access to period products. They came back to our club and said, “This is an issue that we

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should focus on in our club.”

It snowballed from there. We decided to raise money for a sanitary pad machine that we had learned about, which creates pads for extremely low cost. We identified a community by working with the Feminist Majority Foundation, Action India — all of these different nonprofits, NGOs — to develop a really powerful partnership. So, with the sanitary pad machine, a community in India, Kathikhera that we had identified, we decided to embark upon this partnership and install this machine. It was then that we realized that we could have more of an impact by spreading the word or sharing our story than we could by just installing the machine and being done. That was when we decided to create the film, kind of tracking our work and the progress, and as a way to engage the general public with the work that we were doing.

So that’s how “Period.End of Sentence” came to be. As I said, it started my freshman year of high school. I’m now a junior in college, so it really was this slow but steady snowball effect that brought us to ultimately the Oscars last year. There were a ton of intermediate steps like trying to figure out a narrative and make sure that our documentary was accessible, to make sure that we were being respectful to the community we were working with — even identifying a distributor, deciding to work with Netflix and things like that. They were all very deliberate decisions, and it took a long time. But it gave me very hands-on experience learning what it’s like to make not only a movement from the ground up, but to make a film from the ground up and to bring it to this giant global stage with the Oscars.

Since then, it has been so widely talked about — the film itself. And in turn, also, the issue of period poverty. Access to period products. Periods in general. I literally went on *The View*, one of the most widely watched TV shows in America, to talk about the film, but as a result, all of the viewers watching were engaging in this conversation about periods. What we’ve been doing is bringing this topic to a larger and more mass audience, in a way that was never expected when we started this seven years ago. I was scared to go up in front of my school for an assembly to talk about the project in its earliest stages because the middle school boys would hide their faces. They were so embarrassed that we were up there talking about a women’s health issue.

And now I have male friends having viewing parties of “Period.End of Sentence” and people coming up to me to talk about sanitary pads, even in the most basic way. But it still shows that they’re engaging with the issue and in turn, helping contribute to the demolishing of the stigma — which was the entire goal of the movie to begin with.

**KWHS:** That’s super impressive. Can you talk a little bit also about your individual role in the movie? What did it mean to be an executive producer? What did you do?

**Sliney:** Being an executive producer meant working a lot on the behind-the-scenes work of the project. For starters, bringing on Rayka [Zehtabchi], our director, who ended up creating the visuals of the film. And Sam [Davis], our DP [Director of Photography] — same thing. But it was a lot of creating the narrative and shaping what we wanted the film to look like from the backside.

We had to make very deliberate decisions, like are we the founders of the Pad Project, the instigators of the movement going to be in the film? What does that entail? What kind of message does that convey in the film? How long is the film going to be? What platform do we want to distribute on? Even what community do we want to partner with? What do we want this partnership to look like?

It was a lot of the fundamental infrastructure that you don’t really see in the film because you’re watching this seamless progression, but a lot of the decisions that went into the visuals that you see were created by myself and my fellow executive producers, and we were responsible for creating the nonprofit that spurred the documentary and bringing that to life through the film itself. So rather than doing the technical, hands-on camerawork, it was a lot of the behind-the-scenes narrative work, building the structure of what the project and the film were going to look like.

**KWHS:** How has your life changed since winning an Oscar? How have people responded to the movie itself and to you?

**Slaney:** It has been, honestly, a whirlwind, in that none of us expected the film to have this much traction and for people to engage with it as much as they have. We never expected to make it to a single film festival, let alone the Oscars. That has been the most surreal part, that people are engaging with this topic of periods and with the movie itself and the movement itself because we started it and because we made the film. And so the fact that it has been shown and talked about on this global stage as big as the Oscars and beyond has, I think, reflected onto us how important it is to talk about issues in such an accessible way and in such a broad sense.

I have found that people I never would have expected are talking about periods. People are engaging with it, asking me questions. I've been connected with so many different types of people, different departments even at Penn alone. Within the larger global community, people reaching out saying, "I watched your film, and I want to do X, Y, Z with you." Or, "I want to partner in some way. I want to help with the Pad Project." It has, I feel, opened my eyes to this larger scope of what can happen if you genuinely embark upon a movement and engage with people and start conversations that people didn't realize they wanted to have — because once they do, they don't stop.

**KWHS:** Having seen all this impact that you've had, would you like to continue to make other movies in the future? What are your other career goals?

**Slaney:** It's hard because I feel like now this has opened up so many doors to what I could potentially do. I think that filmmaking has been incredible, especially documentary filmmaking, seeing the way that you can portray or convey a social issue to people in a way that makes them want to see it and engage with it. The average person isn't going to read an academic paper about an issue that you've done research on, but they might watch a documentary on Netflix. It has taught me that you can engage the mass audience with really niche issues and get conversations going and make movements and make social change. I would love to keep working in entertainment and in documentary filmmaking, because I think that there's so much that can be done to change the landscape of how we talk about issues and how, honestly, the entertainment industry operates from the inside, as well — to make them engage with the world in a larger sense.

**KWHS:** I have to ask a question that I know everybody wants to hear. How were the Oscars? And can you share any memorable moments other than winning the award?

**Slaney:** The Oscars were surreal, to say the least. I feel like I don't even remember it, because it was such a blur. But it was really cool being in the bathroom and seeing a celebrity walk by and realizing that we were on kind of the same stage, on the same level playing field. It was also amazing because the women that you see in the film, the women from Kathikhera, flew to Los Angeles. Netflix flew them out for the awards, and they all came with us to share the experience. That was also so surreal because that was the first time I'd been able to speak with these women and be with them since the film had been created. And to get to share that moment of being at this glamorous Los Angeles event and to be with the women that we've been working with for so many years was amazing — not to mention the fact that it's the Oscars. I feel like that's everyone's dream, to go to the Oscars and go up on stage and do your Oscar-winning speech.

Even seeing afterwards the video footage and all the photos from being on stage — we weren't supposed to be on stage — that was totally spontaneous. Running up on stage [was not supposed to happen]. Even seeing the footage of that afterwards, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I cannot believe that Reese Witherspoon posted a photo from the awards on Instagram that I was in." She watched me as an audience member being on stage receiving the award. That was a crazy change of dynamics. It was crazy.

**KWHS:** What advice would you offer to students who are also hoping to be in the entertainment business one day?

**Sliney:** When it comes to making content of any sort, the narrative always belongs to the subjects of the film or the TV show, not to the creators of it. And that's something that we have always kept in mind and worked really hard to reflect in our work. The story belongs to the women from Kathikhera who are experiencing this lack of access to products and this shame and stigma. And we are just fortunate enough to have the means to create a mechanism to share and amplify their voices and their stories. I would always say it is selfless work, and it should be selfless work. It's also really important that if you feel like there is a narrative that should be shared, even if it is your own, you should share it, because I never thought that the average person would watch a movie about periods and talk about it to their friends, post about it on Facebook. But that is what has happened.

If you are an aspiring filmmaker, and you want to share a story that you feel is too niche to really resonate with people, still do it because a movie about periods based in India that's 30 minutes long can make it to the Oscars. And I think that you can see that what might be a disconnect really can be connected. Every short story should be shared because there is so much out there that people don't know and can learn from watching films and TV shows that instigate conversations. So do it. Make the move.

**KWHS:** Claire, thank you so much for sharing your story with us today.

**Sliney:** Thank you for having me. This was amazing.