



Whitefish Pilot



Lynn-Wood Fields is center, directing a shoot. (Photo provided)

Whitefish alum transforming Montana’s film industry

By KELSEY EVANS
Whitefish Pilot

Whitefish-raised Lynn-Wood Fields has helped revive Montana’s film industry not once but twice. Now, she’s working to save it from Goliath-level films while training and bolstering a sustainable workforce. Fields developed an early love for film growing up in Whitefish and has since championed the Montana Economic Development Industry Advancement Act. Fields recently stepped down as executive director of the Montana Media Coalition to lead community and marketing development for Story

House Montana, a developing 47-acre film studio in Missoula. As a young student in Whitefish, reading “Perma Red” by Debra Magpie Earling inspired Fields to go to film school at the University of Montana. “Perma Red” is set on the Flathead Indian Reservation in the 1940s. It is the true story of Louise White Elk, a fiery young Native woman who pursues her own freedom, outside of Ursuline Boarding School and dangerous men pursuing her. In all its complexity and challenges, producing the in-progress “Perma Red” made Fields fall in love

with filmmaking. “I helped write the MEDIA Act in 2018 with ‘Perma Red’ in mind and now we have no incentive money for it,” Fields said. “That is heartbreak for me.” THE MEDIA ACT aims to let Montanans tell Montana’s stories, in Montana. The 2019 law offers \$12 million annually in tax incentives for media productions. Tax incentives are a key part of a media project’s finances, and without them producers will go elsewhere, according to Fields. About 39 states and Canada offer competing incentives.

According to a Montana Department of Commerce analysis of the MEDIA Act, from July 2024 to May 2026, 213 productions were filmed in Montana, generating \$469.7 million in local direct spending. Those productions produced an estimated \$241.1 million in economic impact and \$19.9 million in tax revenue. But for local filmmakers, the MEDIA Act’s economic success must be taken with a grain of salt. As Montana became the home state of multiple world-stage productions, the incentives were quickly consumed, leaving gaps for films like

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Beker Rengifo del Castillo breaks silence

By HAILEY SMALLEY
Daily Inter Lake

Fifteen months have passed since Beker Rengifo del Castillo spent a week in federal detention following what seemed like a routine traffic stop in downtown Whitefish. In some ways, it feels like no time has passed at all. “I still have fear,” he said. “If I’m ever going to Whitefish, that’s when the fear is the greatest. I’ll be looking around to see what’s going to happen.” Sitting at the kitchen table in a friend’s cluttered basement apartment, Rengifo del Castillo gave his first public account of the events that led to his detainment in April 2025 and his decision to sue the city and Whitefish Police Department for racial profiling. A native of Venezuela, Rengifo del Castillo immigrated to Kalispell in July 2024 under a two-year humanitarian parole program. Within a month, he received work authorization and a Social Security number, which allowed him to find dual employment as a custodian and a housepainter. A portion of his paychecks went toward supporting family still in Venezuela, including his toddler daughter, but Rengifo del Castillo managed to save enough to buy a used Ford Fusion, which he drove to and from job sites across the Flathead Valley. He had his first encounter with American law enforcement soon after, when a Kalispell Police officer pulled him over. Rengifo del Castillo’s English was limited, so the officer used a translation app on his phone to give Rengifo del Castillo a verbal warning to make sure the car was insured. The exchange was casual and friendly, said Rengifo del Castillo, and he was back on the road a few minutes later. So, when Rengifo del Castillo

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Small school, statewide impact: Skola looks to boost scholarships

By MAGGIE MERCER
Whitefish Pilot

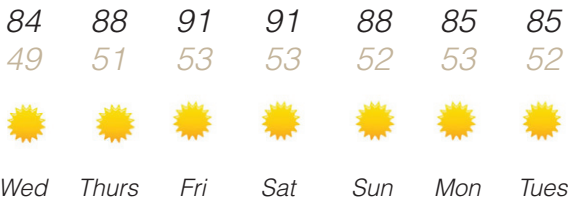
The Skola in Whitefish is in search of support to raise at least \$500,000 this year to become a statewide resource for Montana students. The Skola, located off East Edgewood Drive, is an independent school that focuses on the traditional Scandinavian philosophy of nature-based learning. For the past three years, the school has been a part of a successful statewide scholarship program. This program, The Student Scholarship Organization, or SSO, has one of the best tax incentive options in the state.

“Our mission is to raise scholarship funds and award them to eligible students attending qualified private schools throughout Montana - not just The Skola,” said Ian Hudson, The Skola board member. This past year, the school was able to award funds to students outside of The Skola for the first time. “We’re a small school with a statewide impact,” Hudson said. “The fact that families from places like Missoula are applying for scholarships through an organization based in Whitefish shows that we’re beginning to build a reputation for helping students across Montana.”

Despite being one of the best tax incentive options, the Montana SSO tax credit program is not extremely well known. Through the program, eligible Montana taxpayers can redirect a portion of their Montana income tax liability into scholarships for Montana students, primarily at private schools. The SSO program is like the Innovate Educational Program, which supports public schools. Individuals and businesses in both programs get 100% of their contribution back when they file income taxes. Tax credits are reserved by registered private schools throughout Montana on a first-



See SCHOOL, A7 The Skola in Whitefish. (Kristen Lee Fortier photo)



“We judge others on a moment in time, not knowing the burdens they carry or left behind.”

\$ 50k
Grant for 9/11 memorial

— Roger Lee