

AGING OUT

A Documentary Film
By Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth

A Discussion Guide for Youth, Communities, and Employers

The Film: AGING OUT

Award-winning producers and directors Roger Weisberg and Vanessa Roth produced AGING OUT with support from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Casey Family Programs. AGING OUT is a production of Public Policy Productions in association with Thirteen/WNET New York.

The Issue

On any given day, more than half a million American children live in foster care. Each year, about 20,000 of them will “age out” of care, typically at age 18. Though most 18-year-olds in intact families can expect emotional and financial support for years to come, once youth in foster care turn 18, they are no longer legally entitled to assistance from the state. Overnight, they are on their own.

AGING OUT follows three young people as they exit foster care and face a series of challenges. While each of them struggles, they also demonstrate amazing resiliency and resourcefulness. The film forces viewers to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the public systems that serve these young people, as well as the roles that organizations and individuals can play in assuring their success.



JIM CASEY
YOUTH
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How to Use AGING OUT

Watching AGING OUT can be a powerful learning experience for a group. It is a particularly useful educational tool for older youth in foster care or in independent living programs, as well as for foster parents, caseworkers and court personnel who work with older youth. It can also be used to inform the community at large about the potential for individuals and organizations to provide support and resources to help youth make the transition to independence.

In AGING OUT, viewers will meet these young people:

- **David Griffin**, 18, of Los Angeles, who **was** abandoned by his mother when he was six weeks old and spent his childhood in more than 20 foster care, mental health and juvenile justice facilities. The film follows David during his final days in foster care before he boards a bus bound for Seattle, and ultimately, he hopes, a job on a fishing boat in Alaska.
- **Risa Bejarano**, 18, also of Los Angeles, who was the first member of her family to advance past the tenth grade, despite being abused and molested as a child and shuttling between a dozen different Los Angeles foster homes. The film follows Risa as she attends her high school prom, graduates with several scholarships, and enrolls in the University of California at Santa Barbara. It also chronicles her quiet battle with drug addiction and a devastating emotional breakdown that forces her to drop out of college near the end of her freshman year.
- **Daniella Anderson**, 20, of New York City, who lived in ten different group homes in the five years after she reported her abusive father to the authorities. Now, about to give birth, she can't wait to get free of the system. Daniella juggles college classes with child care responsibilities while she tries to build a life with the child's father, **Veasna Hover**, 19. The film follows the couple as they emancipate from foster care and reluctantly accept welfare benefits so that Daniella can continue college.

Discussion “Starter” Questions

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative has prepared some sample questions that can help spark a discussion after viewing AGING OUT.

Questions for Youth:

- Did anything in the film surprise you? If so, what and why?
- Do any of David, Risa, or Daniella's experiences in foster care seem similar to yours or your friends? If so, what is similar? What seems different?
- If you could ask the youth in the film a question, what would you ask and why?
- Name one choice that David, Risa or Daniella made or one thing that he or she did that you thought was smart, and discuss why.
- Name one choice that David, Risa or Daniella made or one thing he or she did that you thought was a mistake, and discuss why.



- Pinpoint an event in each youth's life that became a turning point for him or her. Would you have handled it the same way?
- What could the foster care system have done differently to make things better for each youth? Discuss David, Risa and Daniella in turn.
- How did you feel when you learned of Risa's death? Did it make you think of any other people you have known who have been victims of violence?
- What can we learn from Risa's death about what supports young people need after they age out of foster care?
- Think about the connections that Daniella and David have to caring adults and their education and employment options. Are they sufficient?
- What do you imagine will happen next for Daniella and David? What opportunities might make a difference for them?
- What types of services and support do you need as a youth leaving foster care so that you can become independent? Consider specific services that could help with education, employment, housing, and making connections to caring adults.
- Are the services you need available in your community? If so, are they useful and easy to access? If not, how can you work with other youth to raise awareness so that your community offers these programs and services?
- What are some ways that youth who have been in foster care can make your voices heard in the community? By the media? By policymakers in City Hall, the state Capitol, or Washington, D.C.?

Questions for Community Members

- Before you viewed the film, had you ever thought about what happens to young people after they age out of foster care? If so, what did you think happened to them? Where do your ideas come from?
- Did the events in the lives of David, Risa, and Daniella surprise you? What were your immediate reactions to the difficulties they faced pursuing higher education? Getting and keeping a job? Finding someone to turn to for help and advice?
- Has the film changed your ideas about the foster care system and the children who are in it? In what way?
- If you're a parent, what kind of support have you provided or do you intend to provide to your own children as they make the transition to adulthood? If you don't have children, what kind of support did your parents provide to you?
- What types of services, programs or support systems can assist young people in their transition to independence?
- In the foreword to *On Their Own*, Jimmy Carter wrote: "*We have a moral responsibility to prepare young people leaving foster care to become whole adults who can fulfill their potential and build bright and promising futures.*" Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?
- What members of the community need to be engaged? Employers? Caseworkers? Clergy? Civic organizations?
- How can young people themselves play a more active role in planning their futures?
- Can you think of ways that we can learn from the tragedy of Risa's death and have her memory guide our efforts?