

FIRE THROUGH DRY GRASS DISCUSSION GUIDE

A film by Jay Molina and Alexis Neophytides

FILM SUMMARY

Wearing snapback caps and Air Jordans, the Reality Poets aren't typical nursing home residents. In *Fire Through Dry Grass*, these Black and Brown disabled artists document their lives on lockdown during Covid, their rhymes underscoring the danger and imprisonment they feel. In the face of institutional neglect, they refuse to be abused, confined, and erased.

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Fire Through Dry Grass* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit

<https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org>.

COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

- Ableism - Discrimination against people with disabilities.

- Intersectionality - “We do not live single-issue lives.” –Audre Lorde. A prism through which to see the interactive effects of various forms of discrimination and disempowerment that understands how racism interacts with patriarchy, heterosexism, ableism, classism, xenophobia— revealing that the overlapping vulnerabilities created by these systems actually create specific kinds of challenges. For example, a person will not only be disabled; they will also be coming from a specific experience of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, religious background, geographical location, immigration status, and more.
- Person with a disability - Anyone whose body/mind does not fit the idea of “normal,” typically impacting one or more major life activities.
- Racism - Discrimination against people based on race.
- ADA - Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990 federal protections against discrimination against people with disabilities.
- Accessibility - Making information, activities, or environments usable for as many people as possible.
- Institutionalization - Unnecessarily removing disabled people or “non-normative” bodies from their own communities and placing them in state-/city-run facilities.
- Discrimination - The unjust treatment of people based on race, ability, sexuality, and so on.
- Interdependence - We meet each other’s needs, knowing that no one is truly independent in this world.
- Power - The ability to control people and events or to influence the way people think/behave.
- Eugenics - The belief that certain lives are worth saving and others (mostly those of people with marginalized identities) are worth less and therefore those people should not be allowed to reproduce. There are certain groups who are seen as having superior genes, leading to a belief that those who are inferior should be eliminated.

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKERS, Jay Molina and Alexis Neophytides

My vision for this film is that decisions about nursing homes are led by nursing home residents because we live with these decisions every day. By showing what we went through, what we're still going through, how the people in charge treated us like garbage, and by getting our story seen widely, I believe we will force our way to the decision-making table.

We also want people to understand who lives in nursing homes—that its people of all ages with all sorts of skills—and that we have jobs and other responsibilities. We're artists, poets, fathers, sons, and friends. Because people see you're in a wheelchair and assume you're not capable.

In the last few years, I've noticed more exposure for disabled people in the arts, but often there is a sense that disabled people are just being highlighted because they are disabled. There's no real acknowledgement of our skills and accomplishments. Our film shows that even though we are in wheelchairs, we are capable people. We have a lot of talent to offer society, if the culture would just make room for our voices. Our film will help make that room.

– Jay

I first met Jay in August of 2019. He was living in Coler on Roosevelt Island, where he had been teaching himself filmmaking and special effects by watching YouTube videos. He won a grant to work with a professional filmmaker, and a mutual friend introduced us. She knew that I had grown up on the island and thought we'd hit it off. Well, she was right! I began mentoring him that summer on a film he wanted to make about him and his friends, the Reality Poets.

When Covid hit the following year, I was terrified for Jay. A few weeks later, when he (and Jennilie) approached me about co-directing this film, I did not hesitate. I knew we needed to get the word out about what was happening inside Coler and I wanted to help in any way I could.

We want this film to blow the lid off the incompetence and neglect inside Coler and long-term care in general and to get the Reality Poets voices heard—so that more resources will be allocated to these facilities and that going forward the people living in them will have a seat at the decision-making table.

As the history of Covid is being put into the public record, it feels vitally important that this story, told by Black and brown disabled nursing home residents, is part of that record.

– Alexis

THE FILM:

PARTICIPANTS

- **Var** - Reality Poet, graphic artist, gun violence survivor, devoted father and son
- **Vince** - Reality Poet, music producer, gun violence survivor, activist, and proud father of a 13-year-old daughter
- **Pete** - Reality Poet who contracted polio as an infant in his home country of Belize and co-producer of *Fire Through Dry Grass*
- **Jay** - Reality Poet, filmmaker, animation artist, and wheelchair user who was born in the Dominican Republic

KEY ISSUES

- Erasure
- Racism and Ableism
- Power
- Art as Activism
- Isolation
- Health Justice
- Disability Justice

FACILITATION NOTES:

We want to create a space that is safe, open, and accessible for everyone to participate. You can use the following to establish agreements (or rules) for

participating in the discussion. These suggestions should help establish a caring and safe environment.

- Use “I” statements
- Challenge the idea, not the person
- Raise your hand if you want to speak
- Listen actively
- Step up/step back (don’t talk over other people, allow others to speak)
- Be respectful of other people’s perspectives
- (Virtual) Keep camera on if possible
- (Virtual) Raise your hand or e-hand or, if you cannot physically do that, unmute your mic to indicate you want to speak
- (Virtual) Host will put people on deck to speak, using the chat

*Even in a virtual space, all housekeeping rules apply!

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Institutionalization and Olmstead Decision

Historically, people with disabilities have not been seen as equals in society. Depending on the culture and period of time, disabilities have been viewed as personal failures of the individual or family or even in extreme cases as punishment from God.

In the early 1700s, people with mental illness and physical disabilities were often put in state hospitals by order of their doctors. At this time, many families did not have any resources to help their disabled family members. During the industrial revolution of the early 1800s, cities began growing and the gap between those who were wealthy and those suffering from poverty grew. Many families who could now afford to care for their loved ones at home chose to do so, while poor disabled people continued to be warehoused in underfunded overcrowded state institutions, where they were subjected to terrible human rights violations. Disability justice has always been an intersection issue, as it is impacted by class, race, gender, and the like.

Throughout the 1800s, more and more state institutions were built in the United States. These state hospitals created a pipeline for disabled people to be rapidly admitted into them and removed from their communities. What were known as the “Ugly Laws” additionally prohibited disabled people from appearing in public and separated them from society. (For example, an 1867 law in San Francisco made it illegal for a person “diseased, maimed, mutilated, or deformed in any way . . . to expose himself or herself to public view.”). By the 1900s many of these institutions were underfunded and overcrowded, and their residents were abused and neglected. In the film, Pete talks about Roosevelt Island’s dark history as a dumping ground for the city’s so-called “undesirables,” and how many people would view Coler, where he lives, as a continuation of that history. While Ugly Laws are not in force today, we still see the essence of these and similar laws in the arrest of unhoused, poor, Black and Brown disabled people across the country.

It wasn’t until the early 1960s that disabled leaders began questioning the “solution” of placing people with disabilities in nursing homes and state institutions. In 1999, Lois Curtis and Elaine Wilson, both disabled women, filed a lawsuit against the state of Georgia claiming that they should have the right to live in their own home, rather than a state institution. The ruling in this lawsuit, also known as the Olmstead decision, was the start of a larger conversation about where disabled people have the right to live. Prior to the Olmstead decision, states decided where people with disabilities were to live. They had no choice, autonomy, or freedom to live where they wanted.

Disability History in the United States

Often when people hear the word *disability* they automatically think of someone in a wheelchair. However, disability is much more diverse than that. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of a person’s major life activities. The ADA is meant to ensure that disabled people have access to most aspects of public life, from voting booths to parking lots to museums and universities.

Protections for people with disabilities began to be implemented as early as 1973. While other marginalized communities had legal protections from discrimination via civil rights laws, disability was not covered under that umbrella, leaving people with disabilities without legal protections. The first improvement in disability policy occurred in 1973 with the passage of Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Section 504 banned discrimination on the basis of disability from anyone who received federal funds. On paper, Section 504 protected the disability community, but activists felt the legislation failed to implement accountability because it specified only institutions that received federal funding and did not have enforcements in place. In other words, leaders felt that policy protection was not enough, and it was imperative to have regulations enforced to remove physical and communication barriers, such as offering access to physical buildings and adding accessible ways to communicate, including ASL, captioning, and braille. Disability leaders, including Judy Heumann, Kitty Cone, Dennis Billups, and Ed Roberts, organized a successful sit-in in San Francisco to push the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to set regulations to enforce Section 504. To date, the 28-day sit-in was the longest sit-in at a federal building in United States history, and it was led by disabled community organizers. These acts of resistance set the stage for the passage of the ADA.

Both the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act were led by disability activists who raised their voices and pushed the government to pass legislation that protects all disabled people across the country. “Nothing about us without us” has become the motto for the disability community, ensuring that people with disabilities are involved in conversations around policy and culture change. In the film, Vince adds to the disability history of organizing and activism when he addresses the crowd at the vigil and says, “We want a seat at the decision-making table where the policies that affect our lives are being written. Because until you’ve been in my seat you can’t tell me how to live my life.”

Disability Justice Versus Disability Rights

The disability rights movement is generally associated with the time in disability history that runs from the era of institutionalization and eugenics to securing rights and protections to the ADA in 1990. Most of the leaders of the disability rights movement were White, physically disabled, wheelchair-using activists who had the privilege to be in powerful spaces where they could influence policymakers. While understanding the disability rights movement is critical to understanding the overall disability community, the movement has often failed to include people with disabilities who have multiple marginalized identities, including people of color, immigrants, unhoused, poor, LGBTQIA+, and formerly incarcerated.

As disabled leaders of the early 2000s were organizing, a new wave of movement leaders emerged and coined the phrase “disability justice.” Disability justice leaders had worked in other freedom/liberation movements and were creatives and artists of color who were tired of not seeing themselves represented in the larger disability community conversation. The overall goal of the disability justice movement is to end all forms of oppression for all disabled people. In 2005, the disability performance art group Sins Invalid presented the framework of disability justice to the larger public. The ten principles of disability justice were written by disabled people with multiple identities who are seeking collective liberation. These principles are as follows:

1. Intersectionality
2. Leadership by those most impacted
3. Anti-capitalist politics
4. Commitment to cross-movement organizing (disability is present in and crosses all other movements)
5. Recognizing wholeness
6. Sustainability
7. Commitment to cross-disability solidarity
8. Interdependence
9. Collective access
10. Collective liberation

Disability justice spaces are led by those most impacted, particularly people of color, and Black, Indigenous, queer, and trans people. It is critical to the disability justice framework that every movement from immigration to housing, climate change, health equity, and Black lives includes disabled people.

Disability rights is a key foundation for providing protections and equal opportunity for people with disabilities. Disability justice goes beyond rights and envisions a future where disabled people are free from all systems of oppression. Nursing Home Lives Matter envisions a world where nursing home residents have autonomy, loving care, and protections from abuse and neglect. This movement centers residents' voices and dreams of a reality where a nursing home is really a home.

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DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Starting the Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask each participant to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

1. What is “home” to you? What aspects of your home make it feel like yours?
2. Do you know someone who lives in a nursing home? Do you know anyone who has been affected by living in a nursing home during the Covid lockdown? Have you personally or has anyone you know experienced isolation due to a compromised immune system/disabilities?
3. What was your initial perception of assisted living homes? Did your perspective change after watching this film?
4. If you were in a similar situation, what would you do?

Art as a Form of Activism

1. What forms of activism have you seen or participated in? Did you feel like they worked? Why or why not?

2. In the film we see the Reality Poets use their art as a form of activism. How have you become civically/politically/socially engaged? Have you used art as a tool for activism?
3. The Reality Poets share their poetry throughout the film to express their feelings. Vince writes an opinion article and drafts a petition to expose the mistreatment and unsafe treatment of residents at Coler. They use their art and words to express themselves without causing harm to others.
 - a. In what ways can personal expression unintentionally cause harm to others?
 - b. What are some ways you can express yourself without harming others?

Political Gaslighting and Power

1. Have you experienced a time when you felt like someone had power over your life? What did you do?
2. Why do you think that people in power abuse their power?
3. What ways can you resist when you're dealing with people or institutions with power?
4. Why is it that when one person is speaking or has an issue with the system they are looked at as a troublemaker, but when multiple people come together they are seen as change-makers?

CLOSING QUESTION/ACTIVITY

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

In the film we see the Reality Poets share some of their own art and poetry about their experience during the pandemic in a nursing home. Now it's your turn! We want you to write a poem or express your thoughts and feelings in an artistic way. You can use the following statements as prompts, or write what is in your heart/mind.

- How did you survive specifically during the pandemic?
- How did your community help you persevere during the pandemic?
- What might it look like to thrive?
- In a post-pandemic world freedom is...

TAKING ACTION

1. Go to the firethroughdrygrass.com website and sign up for our newsletter.
<https://www.firethroughdrygrass.com/home#Movement>
2. Support the Nursing Home Lives Matter Bill of Rights by signing our petition.
<https://www.opendoorsnyc.org/nhlm>
3. Are you a nursing home resident? Share your story of living in a long-term care facility.
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd2YRMt0lRk0n9zJUiTe-aSMhivmvi9iCP046FEQErCKGxJFA/viewform>

RESOURCES

Fire Through Dry Grass official website - <https://www.firethroughdrygrass.com/>

FWD-Doc - FWD-Doc is a global, intersectional community of disabled creators and allies working in media to build a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable entertainment industry. <https://www.fwd-doc.org/>

Long Term Care Community Coalition (LTCCC) - This group is dedicated to improving quality of care, quality of life, and dignity for elderly and disabled people in nursing homes, assisted living, and other residential settings. LTCCC focuses on systemic advocacy and researching national and state policies, laws, and regulations in order to identify relevant issues and develop meaningful recommendations to improve quality, efficiency, and accountability. <https://nursinghome411.org/about/>

Moving Forward Nursing Home Quality Coalition - This group works to improve the quality of nursing home life for residents and staff across the United States.
<https://movingforwardcoalition.org/>

Nursing Home Bill of Rights - The following are rights that we demand be restored and/or newly instated for the wellbeing of people who live and work in nursing homes.

<https://www.opendoorsnyc.org/nhlm>

OPEN DOORS official website - <https://www.opendoorsnyc.org/>

Sins Invalid - Sins Invalid is a disability justice-based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ/gender-variant artists as members of communities that have been historically marginalized. <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/>

Discussion Guide Authors

Rosemary McDonnell-Horita is a disabled Japanese-American woman living in the East Bay of California. She's been supporting, advocating, and fiercely fighting for disability inclusion for 10-plus years. With a focus on youth transition and event accessibility, McDonnell-Horita has experience working with the California Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), the impact campaign for the Oscar-nominated documentary *Crip Camp*, Google, the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, and numerous others. She is currently the impact producer for *Fire Through Dry Grass*. Those close to McDonnell-Horita know her as a conductor of collective access, curator of playlists, and lover of justice.

Alhassan "El" Abdulfattaah was born and raised in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and spent his childhood in Brooklyn and the Bronx with his parents and siblings, with whom he is very close. In a case of mistaken identity, Abdulfattah was shot in a drive-by shooting in 2012 that left him paralyzed from the waist down. Today, Abdulfattah is a core member of the OPEN DOORS design team, using bold graphics to creatively inspire and uplift the community.

Peter Yearwood, co-producer, associate impact producer, and film participant, contracted polio as an infant in his home country, Belize, and has lived with a disability his whole life. In 1970, he emigrated to Brooklyn and met the mother of his children. When that relationship ended, Pete fell into the street life, using and selling drugs. In 2015, many years sober, Yearwood moved into Coler Rehabilitation and Nursing Care Center, where he met his OPEN DOORS brothers, aka the Reality Poets. Yearwood's poetry has been published in literary journals, and he has led poetry workshops for youth and people with disabilities. As a member of the Coler Task Force and the Moving Forward Coalition, Yearwood advocates for nursing home residents' rights.

Jennilie Brewster is an artist who works in various forms and in community. She has traveled around the country painting and writing in response to the topographies, mythologies, and metaphoric possibilities of landscape. She is the recipient of numerous residencies and fellowships, and her work has been shown in galleries and museums and published in literary journals. For seven years, she lived on Roosevelt Island, where she developed and led the arts-and-justice initiative OPEN DOORS. In this role, Brewster guided organizing campaigns and creative collaborations with the Reality Poets—a collective of long-term care residents and gun violence survivors.

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