PART OF THE CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT SERIES: INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE AGE OF PARTICIPATORY MEDIA







THE FIRST STEP











Stories of a Documentary in Coalition Building, Social Change, and Pushing for Progress After the Credits Roll

2025

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The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary and public media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media production, media impact, social justice, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter.

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[1] While interviews were also conducted in three additional states — Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Virginia — these states are not featured in this report because we could only speak to one representative from those states. All other states include interviews with more than one participant of the screening events that were investigated.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AT A MOMENT OF ESCALATING POLARIZATION, *THE FIRST STEP* PROVIDES AN INTIMATE LOOK INTO THE STRUGGLE THAT LONG-TIME ACTIVIST AND POLITICAL COMMENTATOR VAN JONES ENCOUNTERS AS HE TRIES TO FACILITATE DIALOGUE AND ADVANCE BIPARTISAN REFORM AROUND MASS INCARCERATION — ONE OF THE MOST INTRACTABLE, MISUNDERSTOOD, AND STAGGERING SOCIAL JUSTICE CRISES IN THE UNITED STATES.

This study investigates more than fifty examples — across seventeen states — of an interested community member or organization learning about the documentary ***The First Step*** and deciding to host a screening around the film for their community, including: criminal justice reform leaders, educators, pastors and religious community leaders, community organizations, justice-impacted community members, law enforcement, a Republican Senator, a Democratic Representative, student groups, health care professionals, parents, and people who described themselves as "just a community member." These screening events became part of a national grassroots release campaign, supported by the filmmakers, but each individual event took its own unique shape and served its own targeted local aims. By featuring the motivations, challenges and experiences behind each event, almost all of which were hosted in the spring and summer of 2023, this study investigates how a range of community organizations are using and finding value in documentaries to advance local social change efforts.

Through direct participant observation of several community events, along with more than fifty interviews conducted by phone or zoom over a period of one year — from the Spring of 2023 to the Spring of 2024 — this study endeavors to identify both the qualities that make documentary an effective vehicle for community organizers and the longer-tail ripples of influence and impact that follow community screenings.

By revealing empirical data on the relevance of documentaries for grassroots organizations and communities across the country, this study addresses a colossal gap in the fields of communication, media and documentary studies. While there are a plethora of examples of filmmakers and researchers working to instruct and engage communities on the potential of documentaries, there are relatively few studies directed the other way: assessing how communities are independently discovering documentaries and why they feel they are important and relevant to their own interests and needs. To address this gap in understanding, this work explores the types of individuals and grassroots organizations that decided to create community events around the film ***The First Step***, how they learned about the film, what objectives they hoped to achieve, what engagement activities took place around the film, what were the most significant outcomes of the event, and what other events, partnerships, screenings, or related efforts were created as a direct result of the event.

To summarize its findings, **11 key observations** are offered, alongside a series of case study spotlights, which reveal the intimate motivations, uses, and community needs that drove specific people to dedicate their personal time and finances to organizing a documentary centered event around the film (many for the first time). In addition to these key observations, the full report of this study also offers a set of **13 shared features** and **13 long-tail ripples of change, action and further coalition-building** that made ***The First Step*** an effective tool for community engagement efforts across the country.

KEY OBSERVATIONS (A SUMMARY)

1 When community groups were given the rights to screen the documentary film and provided additional as-needed support from the filmmaking team, people and organizations across the country either self-organized (and self-fundraised) screening events and/or worked closely with the filmmakers and their team through screening and promotional frameworks they provided (i.e. theatrical screenings).

2 Collectively, community screenings around the film made an impact on every level of social influence around addiction and criminal justice reform — including at the individual, community, grassroots/organizational, institutional, policy and government levels. Individual screenings in many of the communities even influenced each of these levels in some way — either through people who were in the audience, or through collaborations that were fostered by the screening (i.e. people telling other people in their community about the screening, new screenings that were organized by people who attended the first community screening, initiatives that were forged during discussions that followed the screening, etc.)

3 The modeling of bi-partisan collaboration in the film was adopted by community organizations across the country — who structured events with an emphasis on creating an event (and inviting participants) with bi-partisan collaboration as an organizing value. The documentary bridged political divides across political parties by fostering conversations about initiatives and effective policy to the point where some said "political identity becomes secondary," and the focus becomes more centered on specific issues for collaboration.

4 The documentary demystified processes of collaboration and high-level policy change, showing that if diverse groups of people work together, then they can make major changes in the most influential policies that govern the country. In doing so, the film is being used as a major "disruptive organizing tool" that is helping to provide a behind the scenes look at community organizing — as only a documentary can do — and show people a roadmap for doing community organizing and be a starting point — or a motivating force — in encouraging their efforts.

5 There could be more encouragement — advanced by filmmakers, funders, and distributors — for communities to be empowered in building their own audiences for films and in spreading awareness about documentaries in their own spaces. In a few places, participants suggested that there could be benefits to having LESS organizational (or even filmmaker) affiliation and more community-led recruitment by people in the community impacted by the issues of the film.

6 Documentary screening events served as effective ways for organizations to "introduce themselves" and their work to communities in an non-threatening or purely self-promotional way.

7 The documentary displayed the complexity of key issues (including criminal justice and addiction) in a far more effective way than an organizational spokesperson or article could do alone.

8 Traditional film venues were not as engaged in the long-term stakes or outcomes of the screenings they hosted — raising attention to the issue that theaters and the traditional hosting locations for many films might not be set-up to help support and sustain the work and conversations that social issue films aim to start, and highlighting the importance of working with community-oriented spaces in leading screening recruitment efforts.

9 The screenings empowered justice-impacted people to speak-up about their experiences, elicit respect and build community with local organizations and others in their community. The documentary humanized people who are often misrepresented — or represented in a negative light — by telling fuller, more holistic stories about their lived experiences, especially for those individuals and communities impacted by issues like mass incarceration and addiction.

10 Local events around the documentary sparked news coverage on issues that traditional media had overlooked or not covered in holistic ways (including community efforts to fight addiction and criminal justice crises, etc.). Community screening events led to national, state and local-level news coverage of the issues tackled by the documentary.

11 Participants across communities emphasized the importance of creating more relationship building efforts generally (not just criminal justice reform) in their community, and the documentary film provided a useful mechanism to do this. This was important, participants said, so that there can be more instances of people coming together to show concern for one another outside of political rallies or convenings led by elected officials.

INTRODUCTION

PREMIERING AT THE 2021 TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL, THE INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY *THE FIRST STEP*, DIRECTED BY BRANDON KRAMER AND PRODUCED BY HIS BROTHER LANCE KRAMER, FOLLOWS THE COMPLEX PURSUITS OF LONG-TIME ACTIVIST AND POLITICAL COMMENTATOR VAN JONES, A FORMER ADVISOR TO PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AND FOUNDER OF DREAM.ORG, AMONG OTHER INITIATIVES, AS HE FORGES COLLABORATIONS ACROSS PARTY AND IDEOLOGICAL LINES IN PURSUIT OF A LANDMARK CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM BILL (CALLED "THE FIRST STEP ACT") DURING DONALD TRUMP'S FIRST TERM AS PRESIDENT.

Despite receiving positive widespread feedback from audiences and favorable reviews from major newspapers and industry publications across the country, and successfully screening the film in over 40 regional film festivals following its Tribeca world premiere, all attempts to secure a distribution deal with more than 30 commercial distributors over nearly two years were initially unsuccessful. In addition to facing the range of distribution challenges that many independent films encounter (Borum & Conrad-Perez, forthcoming), a frequent explanation given to the filmmakers was that its focus on bipartisan politics and criminal justice were either too controversial or too niche, and that audiences are not interested in these issues. However, rather than ending their efforts with a successful film festival run and moving-on to their next project, the filmmakers shifted their attention to designing their own impact-focused self-release. By leveraging film festival engagements and relationships formed with grassroots leaders along the way, they designed a structure to make their film available to grassroots organizations that had shown an interest in the film and provided support to effectively screen the film in their communities.

By early 2023, the Kramer brothers had discovered that people across the country were desperate for opportunities to come together and talk about issues related to criminal justice reform, addiction, and bi-partisan collaboration; and their documentary was quickly becoming a useful vehicle for them to do so.

As word spread that the filmmakers were willing to share the film with community organizations, hundreds of people across the country came forward with an interest in organizing screening events. In just a few months, the filmmakers developed a hybrid release strategy in partnership with 8Above (led by distribution pioneer Jon Reiss) and impact producer Devon Dansky, that incorporated elements of a limited theatrical release and community impact screening tour, to ultimately screen the film in more than fifty locations across the country within a four month campaign before ultimately releasing the film on TVOD streaming platforms (with Deskpop Entertainment) and an educational distributor (GOOD DOCS).

Veteran film producer and director Jon Reiss served as a distribution strategist on the film team, and he helped their national campaign to center around the inclusion of as many local theaters as possible in their community outreach strategies. While Jon has been part of many screening efforts in his career, he said that he could tell from the film's opening night event that the community engagement strategy they developed for The First Step had the potential for a special campaign. "I still remember that feeling in the post screening discussion in New York and having that feeling that this is ... the right way to release movies, creating the sense of community and really diving into a topic and having thoughtful discussion amongst panelists, but also with the audience and inspiring audiences," he said, reflecting on the team's focus on linking community groups with local theaters. "A, it engages communities. B, it gets communities out to theaters and to be in community with each other... the other added benefit of doing this kind of release is that where other kinds of distribution deals weren't really possible, this opens up avenues for other kinds of distribution deals."

Devon Dansky, an impact specialist, supported the filmmakers in building a strategy on both a local and national level and in pivoting to a more "DIY model of distribution" once it became clear that traditional commercial distributors "weren't ready to be involved in the depolarization bipartisanship space." In response, Danksy said the team shifted to focus on local organizations and cities that had already expressed an interest in the film or regions where the filmmakers thought there would be interest. By starting with a focus on local outreach the team built a national campaign based on local partners whose demonstrated interest showed where and how the film would resonate strongest. One of the most meaningful outcomes of the efforts, for Dansky, was screenings in prisons. The success of an initial pilot screening in a prison — combined with local feedback and interest in the efforts — led the team to expand the national strategy to include several prison screenings.

"Once we had been connected to a couple folks and had done one prison screening, I think that experience was so special and so moving that it caused us to want to do more," said Dansky.

This study investigates many of these in-person events.

Going beyond the traditional metrics of documentary impact, this report, based on data collected over a period of one year, attempts to capture the intricacies and ripples of community screening events. In doing so, it offers a portrait of why — and how — a documentary can be so uniquely capable of organizing diverse communities in confronting one of the most sensitive and persistent social justice challenges in the United States today.

WHO CARES ABOUT DOCUMENTARIES

Why Investigating Community Engagements with Documentaries is Important

In addition to influencing the types of films that get seen, another consequence of an increasingly consolidated media industry is that grassroots community screenings are becoming increasingly difficult for filmmakers to support. Once a major distributor or streamer acquires the rights to a film, there is often a restricted time period (sometimes as short as a few weeks or eliminated altogether) for the filmmakers to be able to support — and make their film available to — community screening efforts. If there was a silver lining to the film's inability to attract a major distributor for the first few years, it was the ability of the filmmakers to retain their rights and make the documentary accessible to community groups, towns, and people across the country. And perhaps even more surprising than the number of interested organizations they found, the different types of organizations and individuals who organized collective efforts around the film surpassed all filmmaker expectations.



To briefly spotlight a few of the case stories offered here:



In one Arizona event, in February of 2023, the film was screened by the progressive American Civil Liberties Union and the Americans for Prosperity (a libertarian conservative political advocacy group funded by the Koch brothers), two groups rarely associated with one another but who share an interest in addressing the country's mass incarceration crisis.



In another event, in a small Republican-majority town in Indiana, a group of community members and leaders across the political spectrum convened a meeting at the town's single-screen community theater. The discussion included city council members, a local pastor, police officers, probation officers, a YMCA leader, progressive activists, addiction and family medicine workers, neighbors who had children or relatives who recently died addiction-related causes, a local teacher of substance use, and, as one person referred to herself, "just a community member," to name a few people who participated. In the end, city leaders told the authors that the screening event was the most productive community conversations the town ever had on its addiction and incarceration crisis.



After a screening in West Virginia, where one of the film's main protagonists shared the story of how his son died from an opioid overdose in the same town, one person in the audience talked about the screening with Bev Sharp, who leads a collaborative community support organization for justice-impacted people in order to help them overcome reentry barriers and access helpful services and resources. Bev then decided to facilitate her own series of community screenings and dialogues around the film in order to help people better understand the work of her organization (which the Kramer brothers also supported and a national criminal justice foundation ultimately funded), reflecting an example of the type of ripple effect that took place in states across the country.



And, in Mississippi, soon after being released from prison himself under The First Step Act and learning about the documentary, Maurice Clifton had the idea to screen the film in prisons near his community. He said that people in his community don't often gravitate to documentaries, but he wanted to help change that. This study observed at least three other instances, across three different states, of formerly incarcerated people finding the film and deciding to support or independently organize community events around it.

In an industry climate that continues to privilege algorithms, entertainment, awards, high-profile figures, and access to existing fan bases, the importance and role of documentaries within local communities is too often left unexplored and overlooked. Combined with increasing corporate consolidation and emphasis on original programming over acquisition of independent titles, without a better understanding of 'which audiences' are interested in documentaries, and 'why' they are interested, filmmakers may continue to overlook the opportunities and impact within alternative distribution methods. Put another way, in the face of chasing elusive streaming deals with global platforms, filmmakers risk overlooking key allies and interested audiences as primary engines to distribute their films: the organizations and people most affected by their work.

For the filmmakers of ***The First Step***, the goal of helping to support the work of the groups featured in the film — and those like them — was their ultimate marker of success:

"The thing that I think we did the best was to support the people who are on the front lines of leading that work, or the people who will be on the front lines as future leaders; and to offer meaningful experiences and some connections and relationships and tools that are useful in their own skill- and experience- and network-building...I think that that was probably the most impactful thing if I could zero-in on one. And it's the hardest thing to measure." (Personal communication, Lance Kramer)

By centering on the community organizations and individuals who found the film ***The First Step*** relevant to their own lives and work, this study offers a focused exploration of some of the most important — yet hardest to measure or document — aspects of impact in documentary film: the ripples and influence that films have over movement building and how films are being leveraged to change community relations (the way people relate, understand, and collaborate with others in their community) and advance on-going community work.

MORE ABOUT 'THE FIRST STEP'

The Film and the Social Justice Challenge



To provide a brief sense of the scale of the challenge at the heart of the film, while the United States accounts for less than five percent of the World's population, it accounts for nearly 25 percent of its population of incarcerated people, with about 2.3 million of its citizens behind bars, reflecting the highest incarceration rate in the world. Beneath the country's horrific incarceration rate is a history of persistent racial inequities and injustice, with Black Americans facing time in prisons at nearly five times the rate of white Americans. Furthermore, most of the country's incarcerated population (about 60 percent) are held in a network of state prisons and jails, each with their own set of laws, let alone the nearly 200,000 people incarcerated in the federal system. There is a long history of advocates in the country who have worked tirelessly to challenge this paradigm with forms of local and national reform. When president Donald Trump took office in January 2017 on a heavily "law and order" platform, many reform advocates were concerned about a rollback on any gains made up to that point. In response to this challenge, years of advocacy by people across the political spectrum ultimately led to a bill named The First Step Act, passed by Congress and signed into law in 2018. The bipartisan criminal justice reform legislation enacted several changes in U.S. federal criminal law, including changing many harsh federal sentences for people convicted under crack-cocaine sentencing disparities and giving more discretion to judges to give less than mandatory minimum sentences for certain low-level crimes, ending the shackling of women in childbirth, and ultimately reducing the federal prison population (leading to more than 25,000 people returning home after being released early from federal prison), all with the aim of being a 'first step' toward additional needed reforms.

The documentary, ***The First Step***, provides an intimate, personal, and comprehensive look at the development of the legislation and the efforts of grassroots advocates that went into getting it passed, including scenes of high-level meetings in the White House and Congress, contentious conversations between Jones and various movement leaders who disagree with his willingness to work across party lines, emotional gatherings between disparate groups of White conservatives from coal country West Virginia and progressive community leaders of color from South Los Angeles (who both represent communities struggling with different addiction crises—opioid abuse in Appalachia and the criminalization of crack in Los Angeles), and the personal challenges and private moments experienced with Jones himself.

COMPLETE FINDINGS

Highlights of Study

13
KEY FEATURES

of ***What*** Made the Film an Effective Tool for Community Organizations

11
KEY OBSERVATIONS

of ***How*** the Film is Making a Difference

18
CASE STORIES

of ***Who*** Found the Film-Centered Event Useful to Their Work in 18 states

13
LONG-TAIL RIPPLES
OF CHANGE, ACTION AND FURTHER COALITION-BUILDING

of ***Why and How*** the Film Events are facilitating long-term change

BASED ON...

51 IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS
with the filmmakers, community members, and community organization representatives

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION
of in-person screening events in 8 states

INVESTIGATION OF SCREENING EVENTS
convened by 100+ community organizations across 21 states (through combination of participant observation and in-depth interviews)

SHARED FEATURES

that Made The First Step an Effective Tool for Community Engagement Efforts

Recent research has shown that there is no "one way" to do community engagement activities around documentaries (Borum Chattoo 2020; CMSI, 2022, CMSI, 2024). As several interview participants shared, the dynamics and histories of specific communities informs the best approach for a documentary-centered engagement effort. What works in one community will not be the same for another. Similarly, the focus of a film and the goal of a community effort directly influences how a documentary is engaged with. Consequently, any endeavor to establish a 'step-by-step' process or set of 'key ingredients' for such work would be to overlook this fundamental reality (Conrad-Perez, et al., 2022). At the same time, there are several features of the documentary that were referenced by participants across a diverse selection of communities and contexts and which merit greater attention, as they were relevant across many different settings. As elaborated in the methods section, the interview transcripts were coded by thematic categories; the features and findings that were raised by participants in the greatest number of interviews are reflected in the "key features" listed below.

Modeling: an example of the cross-the-aisle change and collaboration model that can seem so difficult to achieve in divisive times. Several participants also pointed out how the film reflects advocates doing their work and thereby providing a "real life", "intimate" and "nuanced" look at the work of advocates who are pursuing a goal and succeeding. Multiple participants said that this provides a model blueprint for the type of work, collaboration, and coalition building that they are trying to build in their community; they say that the film helps them to show that vision to other community members and even provided many organizations with a helpful framework to inform their own strategies. Participants across states said that the screening events they organized — including the decisions that informed who they invited — were directly modeled after the cross-the-aisle, bipartisans approach that they saw work effectively in the film.

Transportive: for audiences that felt drawn into the circumstances of the protagonists on screen in a way that prompted many people to say it changed their opinions on key people and issues they thought they already understood.

Trustworthy: as a source of information. Several participants said that the documentary was a fuller accounting and more explanatory source of information about the First Step Act — and the issues behind it — than they had found elsewhere.

Empowering: participants to build partnerships and to push past old barriers to change. The film focuses on a story of progress and accomplishment, and of what can be done through coalition-building efforts. Several community organizations said that this model of cross-the-aisle collaboration is helpful for them in empowering similar movements in their community.

Multi-Dimensional: through showing new dimensions of issues and people who audiences originally disagreed with or had preconceived assumptions about. Local organizations use these new dimensions to help audiences build empathy and complicate existing understandings to better understand new approaches to collaborating and working together on issues that are of shared concern.

Invitational and Confrontational: across cities, participants noted the invitational quality of documentary film, as a non-threatening way to bring in diverse people and groups together for a shared experience. And, once in the room, it provides an opportunity for communities to confront viewpoints and perspectives that they otherwise might not confront.

Nuanced: portrayals on screen provided a space for community members to consider more nuanced perspectives on their own community issues and to have more complex discussions about them together.

Building Power and Community: for long term organizing. Multiple participants noted how the film and event helped their organization or community to build greater power and recognition — by helping people to better understand the importance of their work and to help them connect directly with people impacted by the themes of the film — in their community.

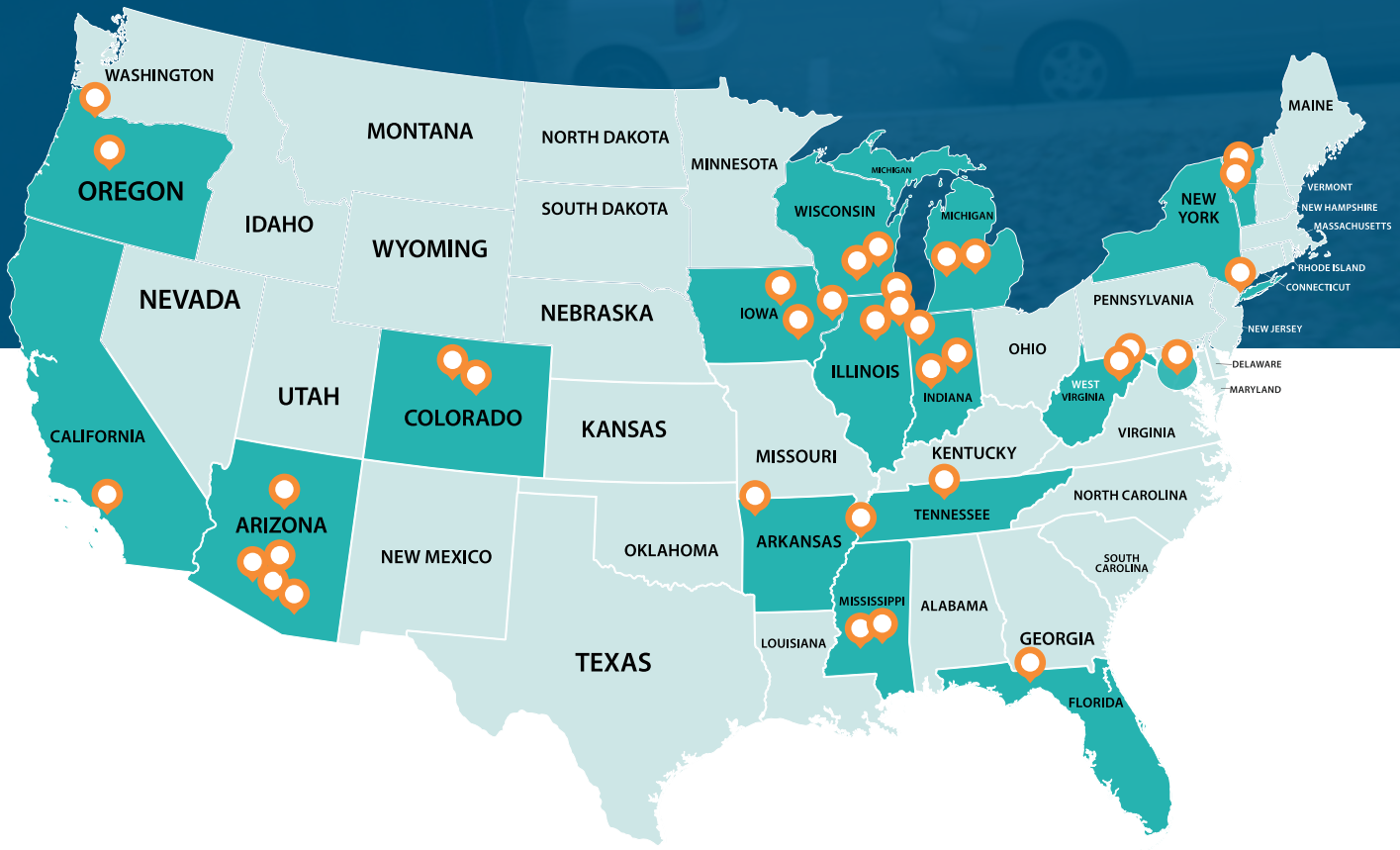
Collaborative: approach to problem-solving. The film was an effective starting point for organizations and community groups to both encourage community members and those in their own organizations to engage with those they disagree with through shared experiences (both in organizing an event AND in watching a screening together).

Providing Proximity: to the community. With each additional screening that derived from the prior screening event, the less the efforts relied on the specific people represented on screen (like Van Jones) or the filmmakers themselves; and the more they successively came to involve and center the justice and addiction work — and other related challenges — at the core of each local community. In this way, the screenings started a process of spotlighting local engagement that still continues in many places today.

Amplifying: work of community and national leaders doing this work. The film served as an effective tool in helping both local and national organizations to better introduce their work to wider groups of community members; to explain their organizational objectives in a manner that is far more effective than a commercial or speech; and to help broaden their tent of supporters.

CASE STORIES

Documentaries At Work: A Note on Research Method and Approach



THIS STUDY INVESTIGATES ABOUT FIFTY EXAMPLES — ACROSS SEVENTEEN STATES — OF A DOCUMENTARY, *THE FIRST STEP*, BEING SELECTED BY AN INTERESTED COMMUNITY MEMBER OR ORGANIZATION AND BROUGHT TO THEIR COMMUNITY THROUGH AN INDEPENDENTLY ORGANIZED SCREENING EVENT.

By featuring the motivations and experiences behind each event, almost all of which were hosted in the spring or summer of 2023, this study attempts to direct attention on how a range of community organizations are using and finding value in documentaries to advance local social change efforts.

This "case stories" section follows — and is inspired by — the landmark 2001 study by Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, entitled "Making Waves," which spotlighted dozens of examples of participatory communication and media projects for social change in countries around

the world. That work by Gumucio Dagron encouraged researchers to embrace the complexity and diversity of participatory communication by understanding that it can manifest differently according to the needs of each unique community. In his study, Gumucio Dagron wrote that: "no blueprint model can impose itself over the richness of views and cultural interactions. Which is to say that none of these experiences is perfect nor has achieved full 'success.'" (p. 6).

In the same spirit, this study does not attempt to determine whether a certain community event was successful or not, but it does aim to offer perspectives on such questions from the perspectives of the community members who participated in the events. Importantly, this study also aims to address a colossal gap in the fields of both 'communication for social justice and social change' and 'documentary': the relative lack of understanding about 'who' cares about documentaries and why. While there is a sizable — and growing — collection of important studies on the role of participatory processes and non-extractive techniques of film production (Cizek and Uricchio 2019; Borum Chattoo 2020), the critical need for greater diversity in a field that remains persistently and dangerously 'white' and 'male' (Driver, 2020; CMSI, 2023), and the impact objectives that filmmakers aspire their films to achieve (CMSI, 2024), there are very few studies that seek to understand the relevance of documentaries in communities.



Protagonists of the film and members of a Los Angeles-based community coalition come together to talk about their experiences with the film and on the importance of criminal justice reform in their community.

In other words, while there are a plethora of examples of filmmakers and researchers working to instruct and engage communities on the potential of documentaries, there are relatively few studies directed the other way: assessing how communities are independently discovering documentaries and why they feel they are important and relevant to their own interests and needs.

In this spirit, this study includes spotlighted perspectives and insights from individual interview participants across twenty-one states, revealing the diverse scope of organizations and individuals who discovered the documentary ***The First Step*** either via their own independent efforts or through the filmmakers' direct outreach, and decided to organize an event around it in their community through various screening models that leveraged their own funding and time, and considerable support and guidance from the filmmakers and their larger national screening campaign efforts, including: criminal justice reform leaders, educators, pastors and religious community leaders, community organizations, justice-impacted community members, police officers, a Republican Senator, a Democratic Representative, student groups, health care professionals, parents, and people who described themselves as "just a community member."

ORGANIZATIONS THAT PARTNERED WITH THE FILM TEAM ON SCREENING EFFORTS.





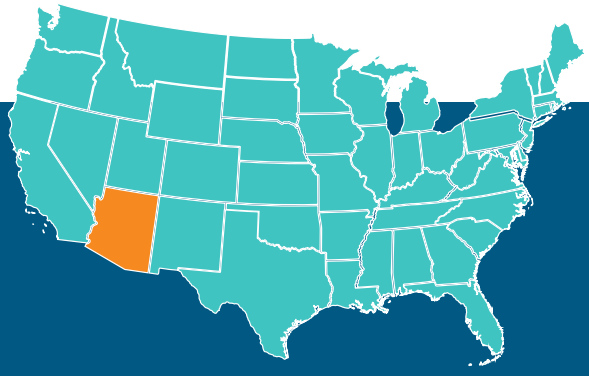
CASE STORIES

Community Partnerships and Screenings

CMSI CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT

PERSPECTIVE FUND

ARIZONA



DATE:
February 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Flagstaff, Gilbert, Scottsdale, Tucson, Phoenix

LOCATIONS:
Legislative offices, movie theaters (Harkins), university settings

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
ACLU Smart Justice AZ, American Conservative Union, Arizonans for Accountability and Transparency (ATAC), Arizona State University, Arouet, Awake Window & Door Company, Dream.org JUSTICE, Just Communities Arizona, Hey Joe Media

KEY INSIGHTS:
Modeling bi-partisan collaboration, forming new relationships and partnerships, community conversation, building new coalitions and reaching new audiences, conveying nuances and complex information in relatable and easy to understand way, create a non-threatening atmosphere, engaging lawmakers, introducing organizations to community members

SUMMARY

LED BY A DIVERSE COLLECTION OF ORGANIZATIONS AND JUSTICE-IMPACTED ORGANIZERS, MORE THAN A HALF-DOZEN COMMUNITY SCREENINGS WERE ORGANIZED AROUND *THE FIRST STEP* ACROSS FOUR CITIES IN ARIZONA.

Among the most revealing aspects of the screenings was their ability to get people from across the political aisle together in a "non-intimidating way," according to several community participants and leaders who participated.

One of the lead organizers of the events, John Fabricius, said that the documentary served as perhaps the most ideal vehicle for building new coalitions and partnerships. John works as the Senior Engagement & Legislative Campaigner for the JUSTICE program at Dream.org. He helped organize several of the screening efforts in his home state of Arizona, including building new partnerships with area universities, foundations, civil society and community organizations, and in building broad coalitions across the political spectrum. In a conversation for this study, John shared his own experience being justice-impacted himself and why he feels documentaries like ***The First Step*** are simultaneously underestimated and vital to efforts for progress in social issues like criminal justice. John has experienced the criminal justice system as both a family member of an incarcerated individual and through his own 15-year sentence in the Arizona Department of Corrections.

"IN ADDITION TO RAISING INCREDIBLE AWARENESS ABOUT THE ISSUE AND HIGHLIGHTING THE NEED TO SOLVE THIS PROBLEM, IT ALSO GAVE US AN EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITY TO ANNOUNCE DREAM.ORG HERE IN THE STATE AS WELL."

—John Fabricius, personal conversation, 9/27/2023

His organization had just started operating in Arizona when he learned about ***The First Step.*** John said that he felt the documentary centered events would be a useful way for DREAM.org to introduce the importance of their work to communities and organizations working across the state; it exceeded his expectations.

John said that he doesn't know of another medium like film that can convey the nuance and complexities of an issue like criminal justice reform to an audience within just an hour or two. And this ability to help educate publics on an issue and create an environment for nuanced discussion and partnership is essential.

"I mean the value in that is that, with this particular documentary, not only were people made aware of the situation, but they were made aware of the incredible complexities, the political complexities to get something done," said John. "I mean you cannot beat the medium for conveying the quantity of information, and at a quality level, as you can through this medium [of film]; I think it is one of the best when you're talking about large scale and multifaceted [approaches]."

Having one of the filmmakers, Lance Kramer, join him for some of the screening events also served to be helpful in further grounding the documentary and making it feel more accessible to audiences, he said.

When John was thinking about how his organization, Dream.org, could introduce itself to other organizations and community groups working in the state, the film provided him with the perfect opportunity.

"I really couldn't think of a better way to make that introduction," he said. **"It gave us a way to introduce ourselves in a way that was not threatening, that was not overly political."**

Through the screenings, John said they formed and strengthened several significant partnerships, including with the ACLU, Arizona State University, and even with conservative organizations — including the American Conservative Union and Americans for Prosperity — that many people would have never anticipated partnering with Dream.org.

"So we had a conservative organization, a progressive organization, a libertarian organization, and the ACLU, all come together," said Fabricius. **"And so the coalition building part of these events was extraordinary.... I think that these documentary films are able to create an environment where people aren't threatened; they're all coming here to watch a movie and see how things go. And so it's a great opportunity, if it's managed well and dealt with well."**

The significance of documentaries in offering a venue for shared experience and coalition building shouldn't be understated, said John, as it solves a central problem for many organizing efforts on social issues in the United States: getting people from different sides of an issue to work together.

"So the number one thing that comes to my mind is that how many times the issues, and this is something I'm thinking about all the time, is how do I get these people, these adversarial, acrimonious people, whether it's to the issue or to each other, to come in and agree on something or to at least step into the same room and hear each other. And that's a really big giant benefit of a documentary. People come into a room and they shut their mouths and they open their ears and their eyes and they watch a movie…That is extraordinary, especially in the work that we're doing. The difference between how the criminal legal system works and what the people think, how it works, it's night and day…And so to be able to educate people through this medium is incredible… And so the benefits to it are, I think, immeasurable and innumerable as far as that goes."

—John Fabricius, personal conversation, 9/27/2023

The screening events organized in Arizona also drew lawmakers and political leadership members from across the political spectrum — from both Republican and Democratic parties — to the same shared spaces. John said he wished he had more data on exactly how much the films moved the needle for lawmakers, but he said many of them told him that it either changed their perspective on the issues of criminal justice reform and addiction, or helped them improve their understanding, inspire more work, and form new partnerships on the issue.

"Did it move the needle with lawmakers? Yes, it did. And those were at times [instances where they would say] 'Hey, this changed my perspective a little bit, or something like that,'" said John. Even during a screening with the lowest turnout, he said, there were legislators in the room.

"We went up to Flagstaff and we had snow, a blizzard, come in, and there were only two people in the entire theater. But it turns out that the two people that showed up were really well connected in the Democratic Party in Northern Arizona, where there's not a huge presence. So even though it was only two people, the [potential influence] of those two people was incredible." — John Fabricius, personal conversation, 9/27/2023

"DID IT MOVE THE NEEDLE WITH LAW MAKERS? YES IT DID."

—John Fabricius



The film's screening participants also included Pat Nolan, a prominent conservative voice for criminal justice reform who founded the Nolan Center at the American Conservative Union. Nolan is also justice-impacted himself, and had been a leader in drafting and shepherding the First Step Act from its conception to passage by Congress; he also participated in the bill signing in the Oval Office. Nolan served on the panel at a Fall 2022 Arizona State University pilot screening. He also helped in the background to make other connections to conservative and faith-based partners. Following the screenings, Nolan noted that the community discussions around the film were as helpful — possibly even more helpful — than the film itself to their efforts.

"I have found the film useful in explaining to activists on the Left the balance necessary to get the legislation signed into law. Often, those activists oppose "the good" and press for "the perfect" and end with nothing accomplished. The film highlights the critical role Van Jones played in keeping the bill on track for passage. The film is aimed at convincing the Left. As a conservative, the film does not help me convince those on the Right that the bill is good and its passage is as important in advancing justice for our perspective...All in all, I think the film is a powerful tool in keeping progressives focused on the importance of getting something that may not be perfect but advances their overall goals. I think the film helps separate those who would rather keep complaining about "the system" from those who actually want to move the ball forward in reforming the criminal justice system. The former offer no actual help to those who are trapped in our failing system, while the latter actually improve conditions for them."
—Pat Nolan, personal correspondence, 10/24/2023

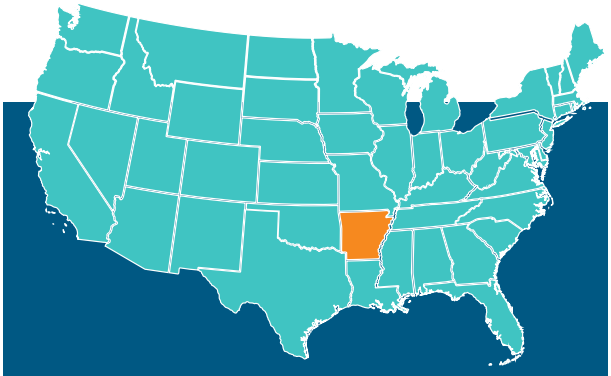
Another Arizona-based organization that was drawn to the film was Awake Window & Door Company, a manufacturing company whose mission is focused on hiring formerly incarcerated people. They reached out to Dream.org with an interest in screening the film in Arizona. **"So we brought them into the mix as a local partner,"** said John. And this is how it has continued to work: one group expressed an interest in the film and that became the basis of further organizational collaboration and coalition-building among a diverse set of organizations across the state.

Kara Janssen, an organizer for the ACLU of Arizona, who participated in multiple screenings, agreed. She said that her goal and hope for the screenings was to both bring community members together and to bring together organizations that could be there to provide support and expand their coalition base; and that has been a process that is continuing to expand based on the spark provided by the screening event.

"...I THINK THE FILM HELPS SEPARATE THOSE WHO WOULD RATHER KEEP COMPLAINING ABOUT 'THE SYSTEM' FROM THOSE WHO ACTUALLY WANT TO MOVE THE BALL FORWARD IN REFORMING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM."

—Pat Nolan, personal correspondence, 10/24/2023

ARKANSAS



DATE:
February 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Fayetteville

LOCATIONS:
Fayetteville (Razorback Cinema Grill & IMAX)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
University of Arkansas School of Social Work, Magdalene Serenity House, Northwest Arkansas Harm Reduction, P.E.A.R.L.

KEY INSIGHTS:
Community building, community conversation, fundraising, coalition building, academic partnership, community empowerment, modeling bi-partisan collaboration

SUMMARY

WHITNEY PAYNE, A PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK, LEARNED ABOUT *THE FIRST STEP* AFTER ONE OF HER STUDENTS — WHO HAD ATTENDED A PRIOR SCREENING — SHARED THE FILM WITH HER.

The student had seen a screening in Little Rock in 2022 organized by Ruby Welch — a local justice-impacted reform advocate — and thought their professor would also be interested. Whitney teaches courses about addiction treatment and drug policy, and she has worked in a prison for seven years, including as a drug and alcohol counselor and a treatment supervisor. After looking into the film further, she knew that she wanted to do something more with it to engage the University of Arkansas community. She reached out to the filmmakers, and for more than six months she explored potential collaborations and ways that she could use the film to organize more engagement around it in her state. She also reached out to two former students from a student organization at her university and they collectively worked to organize a special event that was included within the film's theatrical release framework in 2023.

Whitney said that she appreciated how the film looked at issues of addiction and criminal justice from all sides of the aisle. Whitney and the students worked to include a similarly diverse group of organizations and people in their event — this included representatives from their local police departments, community organizations, housing organizations, courts, area prisons, and justice reform groups. In the end, they were able to sell out the theater of more than two hundred seats; they had a full attendance and Whitney said that it exceeded her expectations and hopes.

"I think it was really helpful. Because when you work in academia, you know, you exist in kind of like a fishbowl. And that was one of the reasons we wanted to do it at [an area theater] and not on campus, because we didn't wanna speak just to college students and just to social work students. We wanted the reach to be bigger. And we wanted to reach community members and people directly affected...the room was filled with people who are currently in drug court, in the early stages of recovery, really struggling. And some of them got up and asked questions or made statements; it was just really beautiful to see people in that position feel so empowered, to speak up or to respond you know? To see a documentary that they might not have had access to otherwise, that's really about them and their experiences that they're having in real time. And I thought that that was pretty significant, you know? And so that was probably my favorite thing about it was just watching all of these people be really empowered to speak up and to not feel alone."

—Whitney Payne, personal communication

In addition to the community event, Whitney used the convening to also help raise funding and attention for Northwest Arkansas Harm Reduction, a grassroots organization in her area.

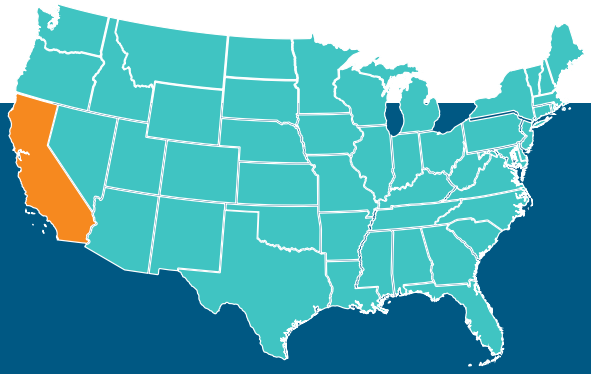
"That was a big piece for me," she said. **"Having people be able to see them, talk to them, having them be able to talk about their mission, the work that they're doing."** Another area of unique influence that Whitney said they were able to achieve was being able to open up a space to talk about addiction and its impact in a collective, community setting in a way that simply rarely exists, but which a documentary, she now realizes, is fully capable of creating.



"THAT WAS A BIG PIECE FOR ME...HAVING PEOPLE BE ABLE TO SEE THEM, TALK TO THEM, HAVING THEM BE ABLE TO TALK ABOUT THEIR MISSION, THE WORK THAT THEY'RE DOING."

—Whitney Payne

CALIFORNIA



DATE:
February-March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Los Angeles

LOCATIONS:
Movie theater (Laemmle Royal)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
People Coordinated Services of Southern California, Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, Los Angeles Community Action Network (LACAN), Meridian Hill Pictures, USC Dornsife Center for Political Future, Ciera Foster

KEY INSIGHTS:
Recognizing the work of the film's protagonists, coalition building, youth empowerment, community conversations, modeling civil leadership

SUMMARY

THE FILM'S THEATRICAL RELEASE OPENED WITH A WEEK-LONG SERIES OF MAJOR SCREENINGS HELD IN LOS ANGELES, INCLUDING ONE SCREENING EVENT THAT FEATURED VAN JONES AND OTHER LOS ANGELES-BASED PARTICIPANTS FROM THE FILM ON A PANEL, AND EVEN INCLUDED AN AWARD CEREMONY WHERE VAN, THE FILMMAKERS, AND A CALIFORNIA STATE REPRESENTATIVE AWARDED MEMBERS OF THE LOS ANGELES COALITION WITH RECOGNITION FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA FOR THEIR IMPORTANT COMMUNITY WORK.

The opening night premiere screening had an attendance of more than 100 people.

Throughout the week, other special screenings at the Laemmle in Los Angeles were organized by people who were not specifically involved with the making of the film, but who saw its potential in centering important conversations related to their work. This was the case for Kamy Akhavan, who saw the opportunity to use the film as an engagement tool for the young people he works with. Kamy is the executive director of the University of Southern California's Dornsife Center for the Political

Future, which works to study and advance civil dialogue, political storytelling, bridge-building and other research **"that transcends partisan divisions and finds solutions to pressing national and global challenges."** Kamy is an active member of the Listen First Coalition, among other initiatives, and was one of several Listen First Coalition members nationwide who partnered with the filmmakers throughout the release.

After hearing the filmmakers talk at a Listen First Coalition virtual screening event, Kamy said that he felt moved to organize a screening in Los Angeles. He said that about twenty people came to the screening he helped organize. For Kamy, he established the broad goals of community-building among young people and providing an educational opportunity — by using the film to help young people engage with the messy realities of bridge-building and to help them to move into civic life as leaders who are not stuck in old models of hyper partisanship:

"So modeling the kind of lasting bipartisan change to really make a difference on these pressing social issues, that was the motivation number one. It was: this is how you do it, please watch and learn because this is how the sausage is made and it's not pretty and it's not a series of victories. There's constant setbacks and it takes tremendous dedication, but that's how it happens. And I thought that was an honest, realistic look at how it happens. So that was the real goal. Then beyond that, it was for people to bond over that and develop their own relations with people who don't necessarily think like them across an issue as important as criminal justice reform."

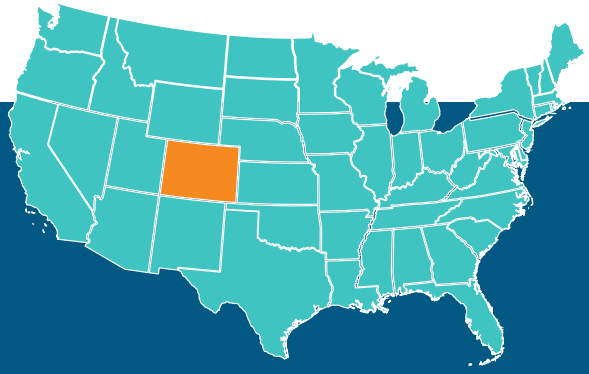
—Kamy Akhavan, personal conversation





In the future, Kamy would like to organize multiple screenings, as he felt the model was so effective that he feels it should be scaled-up to engage more people in more cities.

COLORADO



DATE:
February 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Boulder, Denver

LOCATIONS:
Dairy Arts Center, Movie Theater (Harkins Denver)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
MOTUS Theater, Realness Project, Community Works, Younify

KEY INSIGHTS:
Building "stable datum," creating generative community conversations and convenings, coalition building, new partnerships, modeling bipartisanship



SUMMARY

IN COLORADO, A FORMER PASTOR AT BOULDER'S FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UCC — WHO IS KNOWN IN THE COMMUNITY FOR HIS EFFORTS AROUND ANTI-RACISM WORK, AND HIS SUPPORT OF HOMELESSNESS-BASED INITIATIVES, AMONG OTHER COMMUNITY WORK — SAW AN OPPORTUNITY TO USE THE DOCUMENTARY TO HELP PEOPLE BETTER UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITY OF GOVERNMENT AND ORGANIZING EFFORTS.

"I thought it would be important for people to see the complexity of government and all the different processes and how people who are in office will do the whole back and forth thing on both sides," said Pedro Silva, who supported screenings in his state, and who had experience traveling to the capital to seek progress on various community-based efforts during his 10 years as a pastor. Lance Kramer had connected with Pedro through the Listen First Coalition earlier in the year.

By hosting a community screening, Pedro said he saw a unique opportunity to build a shared community experience on an often divisive issue that is often not engaged with in a collective experience among people with different points of view. He referred to the process as building a **"stable datum,"** that is an anchoring point that can serve as a solid foundation for further community interrogation and work.

"One of the things I value is, which I learned from a mentor of mine, is something called stable datum: the idea that if people have a common experience that they can reference, then it's easier to bring them together. And so I see films and other experiences as ways of building stable datum so that we can say, we can reference back to the film and say things like, oh, you remember in the film when this [happened], remember in the film when that [happened], and bring up that kind of conversation that allows people to have cohesion... And so I see the film as a way of doing that because it brings people at least temporarily into a state where when you watch a film, you have to come outside of yourself. If you're actually witnessing the film, you got to come outside of yourself for a moment. And so now you're in a group, in a short term community of an hour and a half, with people who then all have to come outside of themselves to engage in the film. And then if you're using that data or that film is a way of bridging."

—Pedro Silva, personal communication

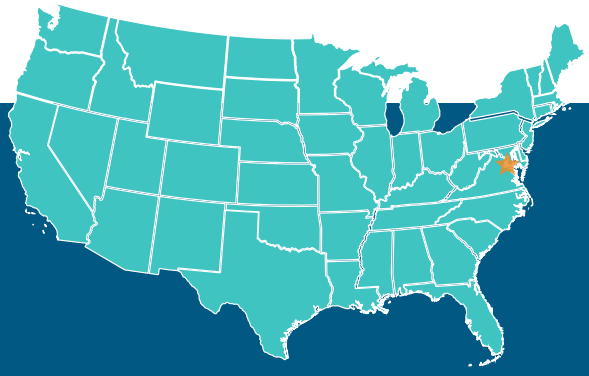
Pedro says he found the screenings to be meaningful and successful, and that they should become more commonplace. He says that other communities should consider picking a theater and partnering with one or multiple local nonprofits that have **"a footprint that expands within the same radius of the screening."**

Before one screening that Pedro helped organize in Boulder, there was a major snowstorm, but the event was still sold out. And Pedro said that people even called in to ask **"Hey, I know it's snowy. If anybody gave up their ticket, can I come in?"** Before the screening began, there was a hip-hop performance and spoken word poetry by a justice-impacted individual, and several local advocates and organizers were featured during the event. In this way, the film was used as a convening tool for the wider community to learn about and better engage with the local perspectives and efforts that were taking place in their city.

Juaquin Mobley, a justice-impacted person who works for organizations dedicated to community-based work, also supported community screenings in both Boulder and Denver. Juaquin was connected to the filmmakers through film participant Louis L. Reed. And, from Juaquin's experience, he said that it's undeniable that the film provided an ability to not only convene communities but to enlighten and even change perspectives. "I think film in general has the power or possesses the power to broaden perspectives and potentially sway the public opinion about taboo subjects," he said. **"And with that, I believe that [*The First Step*] is accomplishing that."**



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA (WASHINGTON D.C.)



DATE:
February 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Washington D.C.

LOCATIONS:
Edlavitch DC Jewish Community Center (JxJDC)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
DC Office of Cable, Television, Film, Music & Entertainment (OCTFME), Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, Dream.org JUSTICE, REFORM Alliance, Goucher College Prison Education Partnership, Prisons and Justice Initiative at Georgetown University, The Reinvention Center

KEY INSIGHTS:
Coalition building, community conversation, improved government sponsorships, fundraising, relationship building

SUMMARY

A WEEK-LONG SERIES OF SCREENINGS TOOK PLACE IN THE COUNTRY'S CAPITAL, HELD AT THE FILM CENTER AT THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER IN D.C. (KNOWN AS JXJ). EACH NIGHT AT DC'S JCC, A DIFFERENT SET OF PARTNERS PRESENTED THE FILM, EACH FOCUSED ON EITHER CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM, BRIDGE BUILDING, OR PRISON EDUCATION INITIATIVES. OVER THE COURSE OF FIVE NIGHTS, MORE THAN 500 PEOPLE ATTENDED SCREENINGS, WITH THE FIRST TWO OPENING NIGHTS SOLD OUT.

One of the partner screenings was organized by Evelyn Rupert, Director of Communications at the Georgetown University Prisons and Justice Initiative. Evelyn says that she works on a small team at Georgetown that primarily focuses on prison education and reentry work. She estimates that about forty people attended the screening that she participated in. There was a productive panel conversation after the film, which included a panel of formerly incarcerated community members who spoke about their experience with re-entry.

In addition, the generative conversations that took place during and after the event, Evelyn said, helped her to strengthen her organization's connections with key sponsors and to strengthen their government partnerships with both the DC Attorney General's office and the Mayor's office, since someone from both offices attended the screening and spoke on the panel.

Evelyn said that her team tries to bring a lot of different types of perspectives and different types of people together around criminal legal reform issues, and the film "really exemplified that on the biggest stage" by showing how different groups that probably never would have collaborated with each other usually can come together to create meaningful change. "I think this was reflective of our approach as well, and wanting to build some bridges and bring new people into the conversation around criminal justice reform," she said. "So I think that's why it seemed like a good fit for us." Evelyn said the film and screening event highlights the way in which documentaries can motivate community engagement work and grassroots efforts by modeling what's possible, and creating a useful entry point to localizing the issues and challenges.



"IT WAS MOTIVATING IN THAT WAY TO OUR WORK TO THINK ABOUT HOW WE CAN TRY TO REPLICATE THAT EFFORT AND BRING PEOPLE TO THE TABLE, AND ALSO JUST SHOWED THE VALUE OF HAVING GOOD CONVERSATION ABOUT A FILM OR A CERTAIN ISSUE. I THINK GOOD CONVERSATIONS CAN BE THE START OF REALLY FRUITFUL COLLABORATION. SO I THINK THAT THE FILM ITSELF AND THEN ALSO THIS TYPE OF EVENT WAS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THAT."

—Evelyn Rupert, personal communication

Above all, Evelyn said that the film's role in coalition-building and expanding their government partnership was perhaps the greatest outcome of the screening from her organization's point of view.

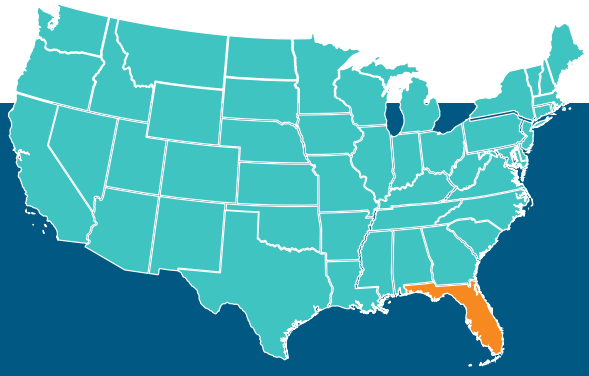
"I think primarily coalition building [was our greatest achievement]. We had on our panel and in attendance the Deputy Attorney General in D.C., and we have several program alumni who are employed at the attorney general's office who have graduated from our paralegal program. So for us, that was important to keep engaging with them in particular because they've been such a strong partner to us and have really opened the door to our program graduates. So I think that in itself was worthwhile because we just had a chance to work with him and collaborate with him before, during, and after the event, and also to connect him with some other partners and current students, past students. And so I think relationship building again was probably the biggest outcome for us."

—**Evelyn Rupert,** personal conversation





FLORIDA



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Tallahassee

LOCATIONS:
University setting

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Florida A&M University

KEY INSIGHTS:
Coalition building, centering bi-partisanship collaboration, modeling civic leadership, community conversations



SUMMARY

IN ONE FREE SCREENING ORGANIZED BY JOSHUA ALVAREZ BROWN AT FLORIDA A&M UNIVERSITY, AN HBCU IN TALLAHASSEE, MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED PEOPLE SHOWED-UP.



One of the event organizers, Joshua Alvarez Brown, of Society First, an organization dedicated to criminal justice reform in Florida led by justice-impacted people, said that the film's role in centering bi-partisan collaboration is hugely important in his area. Joshua originally met producer Lance Kramer at the Sarasota Film Festival in 2022 and remained in touch over the course of a year about planning a follow-up event in Tallahassee, ultimately leading up to the 2023 FAMU screening.

"ONE THING THAT I REALLY LIKE ABOUT THE FILM IS THE BIPARTISAN NATURE OF IT, THE MAIN MESSAGE OF HOW IT TOOK REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS TO COME TOGETHER TO MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN. AND THAT'S ONE OF THE THINGS THAT WE REALLY ATTEMPTED TO FOCUS ON IN OUR OWN GOALS AND WHAT WE'VE BEEN TRYING TO DO."

—Joshua Brown, personal conversation



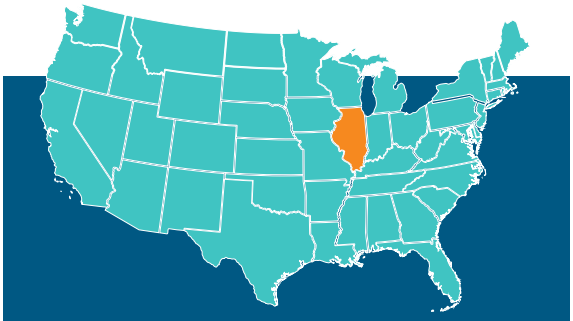


Joshua said that the film's focus on bipartisanship allowed his organization to seamlessly align its own work with it, and to use it as a platform for starting important community conversations — which they did through the screening — and expanding their coalition (which he says was markedly increased because of the screening event).

And the message of bi-partisan collaboration resonated with both their wider community, exemplified in their turn-out of one hundred people showing-up to watch the film and participate in the event, and in the caliber and diversity of people who attended the event through introductory remarks and panel participation, including: former Florida Senator Jeff Brandes (Republican); Florida Senator Bobby Powell (Democrat); Neil Volz, Deputy Director of Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRCC); Nina White-Hodge, CEO of Society-First; Mark Schlakman, International Human Rights Attorney; Katie Bohnett, Alliance for Safety and Justice; Marquis McKenzie, Organizing Director of FRRC; Patricia B. McCray, CEO of Butterfly Life Journeys, CEO.

Filmmaker Lance Kramer and student representatives from FAMU also joined and participated in the event.

ILLINOIS



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Aurora, Bloomington, Chicago, Wilmette

LOCATIONS:
Movie theaters, private company offices, Talk Lab, public event and community spaces

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Giving Others Dreams (G.O.D.), Transforming Re-Entry Services, Kartemquin Films, Talk to Me Foundation, Fully Free, WE With Everyone, Win Recovery, Fully Free, Life Impacters, Art from Heart, Winners Circle, Organize (IL), Challenge II Change

KEY INSIGHTS:
Coalition building, expanded partnerships, community conversations, significant community building

SUMMARY

AFTER A COMMUNITY SCREENING AND NONPROFIT FAIR ORGANIZED IN THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO, SOMEONE IN THE AUDIENCE ASKED IF HE COULD SAY A FEW WORDS. HE STOOD UP AND REVEALED THAT HE WAS JUST RELEASED FROM A LENGTHY SENTENCE AS A RESULT OF THE FIRST STEP ACT.

He was feeling both grateful to be back in the community and overwhelmed about the uncertainty of what to do next.

At the event, he said that he was grateful to find a space where people were not only coming together to better understand the experiences of people like him, but that they were engaged in a conversation about how they could help provide support. The room applauded the man's courage in sharing his experience and the organizer, Celia Colón, immediately pointed to specific organizations in the room for him to connect with. It was a day that he said he wouldn't forget.

The event came together because a community leader based in Chicago, Celia Colón, was so driven by the potential of the documentary as an organizing tool that she helped lead six community screenings across the state of Illinois. An advocate for young people and a supporter of several organizations, Celia is CEO of an organization named G.O.D. (Giving Others Dreams), which focuses on violence intervention, violence prevention work and supporting justice impacted families. Celia works with more than twenty organizations throughout the city of Chicago and the State of Illinois on intersecting issues and saw the film as a way to engage many of these organizations in a shared experience.

Celia said that the film provided a powerful focus on the important organizing work that deserves to be better represented and recognized, and which centers the stories of justice impacted people in an important and caring way. For her, the story it told was both professionally and personally resonant.

"The film is one of the rawest, purest films that I've seen that actually has documented the work of tireless advocates around the nation who are completely engulfed and changing the narrative and creating equality in this world...how stressful it is, how it impacts millions of lives once things are changed in the right direction. So for me, it's personal. As someone, who myself, I'm justice-impacted as well. I spent my youth in prison and I've been home 21 years doing this work as well, changing the harm that was done to me while I was incarcerated. So this is very personal for me."

—Celia Colon, personal conversation





After learning about the film and meeting the filmmakers at a screening in 2022 at Chicago's Black Harvest Film Festival at the Gene Siskel Film Center, Celia partnered with the filmmakers during the 2023 theatrical release to lead a multi-city effort to bring together community organizations that are working on justice-related issues. In addition to the anchor screening on the southside of Chicago, Celia organized events at selected movie theaters across the state, each partnering with local organizations. At the core of her hope, she said, was to use the film to help spread greater awareness around the stories and existing challenges of people who are justice-impacted and the important organizations that are working to better serve them.

"I JUST WANTED TO KNOW HOW I COULD HELP SHARE THIS AWARENESS SO OTHER PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT INVOLVED IN THE SYSTEM CAN SEE WHAT HAPPENS, HOW THIS IMPACTS THEIR LIFE AND HOW THE WORK IS DONE BEHIND THE SCENES. AND I ALSO WANTED IT TO GIVE HOPE AND INSPIRATION TO THE PEOPLE WHO ARE ON THE GROUND LIKE ME, WHO SOMETIMES FEEL LIKE GIVING-UP."

—Celia Colon, personal conversation



The screening efforts supported by Celia led to levels of collaboration and connection that even surprised her. Going beyond the traditional use of a film for a policy goal or targeted campaign, Celia's work and efforts around ***The First Step*** illustrate how organizations are using documentaries as another organizing tool — folded into their other strategies and partnerships — to build power, foster community approaches, and broaden coalitions. Ultimately, Celia said that the work they are doing isn't about one-off events; it's part of an effort of building coalitions that can return again and again and push for change for the long haul. The documentary served helpful in that longer-tail goal.

Similarly, in Aurora, Illinois, Javier Reyas found the film useful in coalition building and educating people in his community about criminal justice. Javier is a restorative justice practitioner and is formerly incarcerated himself; he came home under the First Step Act, and has since played a central role in leading community efforts. Javier also initially saw the film at the 2022 Black Harvest Film Festival screening at the Siskel. Javier organized a screening in Aurora, and has plans to also support screenings at DePaul University and Northwestern University.

Javier is the Founder and CEO of Challenge II Change, a non-profit organization that offers comprehensive pre-release and re-entry planning and resources that people need for successful transitions back into communities. He said that film screening events have directly helped him and his organization — Challenge II Change — to expand their coalition and even bring new board members. They have since been invited by an area judge who attended a screening to come to his courtroom in order to "advocate for some of the men and women who are coming in front of him with different programs, alternatives to prison." A county board member was also so moved by the documentary after a screening event that she expressed an interest in doing more to support restorative justice work and has since joined the board of Challenge II Change.

On a personal level, Javier said that the film and screening events have been helpful in opening people's eyes to the experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated members of their community, along with the work that goes into changing laws.

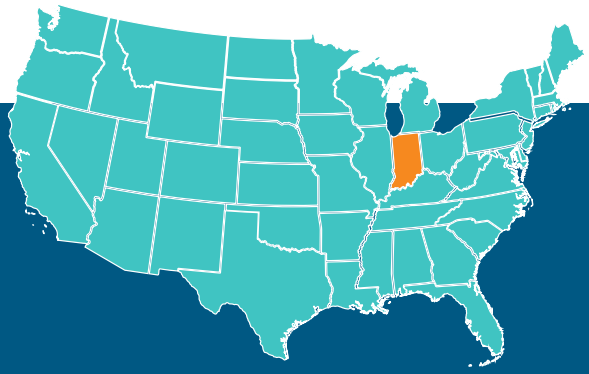
"A lot of people have no idea of the process of changing these laws and all these barriers that exist for people who are incarcerated or even how the replacement of parole in the federal system was not working for almost 30 years, until this film came about. And you are able to highlight that [with these events]."

—Javier Reyas, personal conversation





INDIANA



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Hammond, Muncie

LOCATIONS:
Community theater (Civic theater), University spaces, police department

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Purdue University West, Delaware County Police Department, The Facing Project, REFORM Alliance

KEY INSIGHTS:
Coalition building, community partnership, bi-partisan collaboration, community conversation, police engagement/training



SUMMARY

ON A SNOWY DAY IN MUNCIE, INDIANA, ABOUT 100 COMMUNITY MEMBERS TRUDGED THROUGH WIND AND SNOW TO ATTEND A SCREENING OF THE FILM AT THEIR COMMUNITY'S HISTORIC SINGLE SCREEN THEATER.

Muncie is a small town in rural Indiana, which is widely known as the 'typical American city', because of the work of two sociologists, known as the 'Middletown Studies', during the 1920s and '30s. The sociologists focused on the small town of Muncie, where they set out to determine the characteristics that makeup the typical American city. Since the time of the study, Muncie has seen its manufacturing industry disappear, along with a grave increase in its poverty rates.

And now, like in many other American cities, the town of Muncie is struggling with a dire addiction crisis that city leaders say accounts for one of its most pressing, if not its most urgent, problems.

A panel of concerned citizens filled every corner of the stage for a post-screening community conversation and reflected a surprisingly representative slice of the city, including: city council members, a pastor, a police officer, a probation officer, a YWCA leader and community activist, an addiction and family medicine worker, neighbors who described themselves as "just community members," a community member who had a child who recently died from addiction in the community, a recovering addict and community counselor, and a professor with a specialization in substance use.

The conversations that followed the film lasted longer than the ninety minute film itself, with one person noting that their community needs more **"open dialogues like this to help the people who need us most."** The community members spoke about work they were doing to help, including distributing Narcan, a life-saving medication used to reverse opioid overdoses, to people who have experienced an opioid overdose, helping people who are unhoused through shelters, and going door-to-door to talk to community members about resources that exist to help those with addiction problems. The participants spoke about the interconnectedness between the city's issues around opioids — and addiction, housing insecurity, and poverty — and how they have been desperate for forms of community convening like the one facilitated around the film. The pastor, who is one part of a duo known in the community as "the pastor and the witch" — because they bike around the community distributing Narcan — emphasized the importance of more relationship building efforts (not just criminal justice reform), like the one created by the film, so that there can be more instances of people coming together to care about each other - not organizations coming into the community (who aren't trusted) or simply laws that don't address the root causes. **"Not knowing our neighbors is the problem here,"** said the pastor at one point during the discussion.

J.R. Jamison was the lead community organizer for the event. Jamison is co-founder and president of a Muncie-based community organization called The Facing Project, a national nonprofit that endeavors to create a more understanding and empathetic world through stories that inspire action. Outlined in their mission statement, the organization works to "bring people and communities





"NOT KNOWING OUR NEIGHBORS IS THE PROBLEM HERE."

—A pastor from the community



together through acts of empathy that include listening, storytelling, and connecting across differences with the belief that stories are the most powerful tool for change." J.R. is also an author and host of an NPR radio show/ podcast called The Facing Project.

J.R. said he learned about the film through an initiative called the Listen First Coalition, a group of about five hundred different (mostly nonprofit) organizations that are working toward fostering better listening, active listening discussions across differences and communities. The coalition aims to create a more understanding and empathetic world through stories that inspire action, and it has monthly calls in order to discuss possible intersections of their work and to provide other opportunities for collaboration. On one of the calls, producer Lance Kramer introduced the film and invited Listen First Coalition members to join an advisory group to partner on screening events nationwide. J.R. got involved because he thought that it would be a great way-into starting a much needed conversation in Muncie.

While their organization focuses on storytelling and has been working in the community for about eleven years, it was the first time they had used a documentary film as part of their community work — they had previously focused primarily on podcasts, book launches, and theatrical productions. But J.R. felt that the film was uniquely positioned to advance conversations that the community desperately needed to have. One of the most powerful narratives in the film, J.R. said, was around the relationship that Tylo James (from Los Angeles) and Dee Pierce (from West Virginia) formed in their coalition building efforts. While the two individuals came from a very different set of life experiences and political beliefs, they found common ground during the course of the film.

"They had different views, but had both experienced heartbreaking loss. And it was that loss and shared tragedy that kept them together in the film, even though there were moments where even at the White House, where Tylo was basically saying, 'I don't want to go in there.' And she eventually did...with Dee and others. And it was just such a beautiful display of despite differences, that really, when we can come together around the common cause, that's the strong point. And to show that in a way where it's like we're completely different. We probably agree on nothing, but we have the shared tragedy that we're fighting for change. And so in this moment we can do that. And I know talking with [filmmakers] Lance and Brandon, they've shared with me that Tylo and Dee have stayed in contact and that most of the people in the film have remained friends. And it was through that process that those relationships were developed, and that really points to the kind of work that we're trying to do through The Facing Project too. And so when I previewed the film before making a decision to bring it, it was really that storyline, of Dee and Tylo that I said, that is enough for us to bring the film to Muncie."

—J.R. Jamison, personal communication

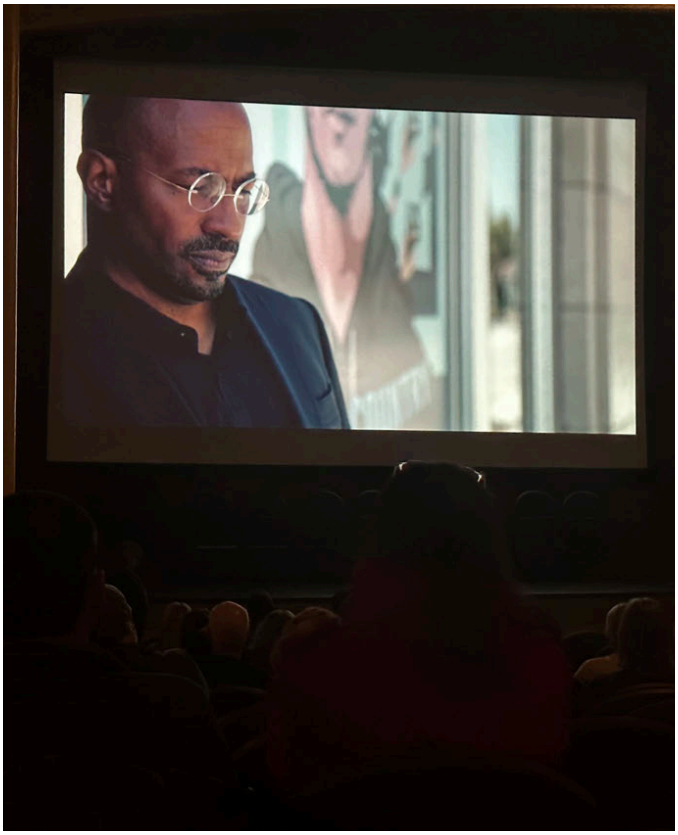
While a winter storm dampened some of the turnout for the event, more than 100 community members still showed-up for the film — and nearly everyone stayed for the more than hour long discussion afterward. And, more importantly, J.R. said that several of the community members who came are still collaborating around issues that were raised during the event.

"We're still in conversation with partners from the event and we're actually starting a Facing Project here in our community based off of themes on the film, particularly around harm reduction. So if you might recall in that panel discussion, we started to talk about Narcan and the access to Narcan and the understanding of what it is and getting it into the hands of teachers and other professionals. So we're actually doing a Facing Project on that topic that is starting this winter. We'll capture stories of people who have changed their minds around Narcan, including one woman who is a devout Mormon and very conservative, and she's the biggest advocate for needle exchange programs and also for harm reduction. So that's one byproduct that's coming out from the film coming to Muncie and the panel coming together to have that discussion."

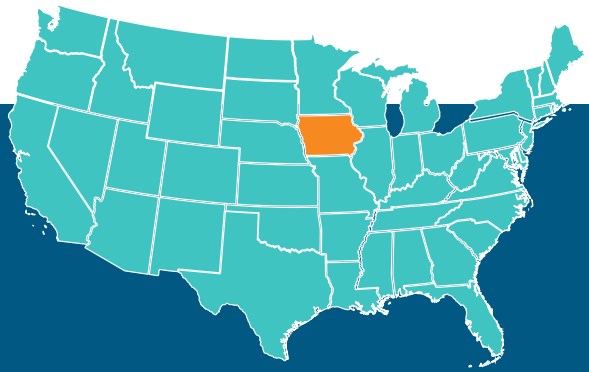
—J.R. Jamison, personal communication

In addition, another community member who attended the Muncie screening event, a police officer in the local county's police department, was so moved by the documentary — and the discussion that followed it — that he organized new training around the film for officers working in the county.





IOWA



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Davenport, Iowa City, Waterloo

LOCATIONS:
Movie theaters (Marcus Theater, Putnam Theater)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
University of Iowa, Dream.org JUSTICE, REFORM Alliance, IMAN Consulting

KEY INSIGHTS:
Convening productive conversations, coalition building, empower new advocates and activists



SUMMARY

IN IOWA, MULTIPLE SCREENINGS AT MOVIE THEATERS AND COMMUNITY SPACES WERE ORGANIZED THROUGHOUT THE STATE BY LADRINA WILSON, WHO LEADS COMMUNITY WORK THROUGH HER ORGANIZATION IMAN CONSULTING AND THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS, INCLUDING DREAM.ORG.



LaDrina said she felt that the documentary could provide a productive "entry point to be able to begin to have a broader conversation, not just about specific criminal justice reform, but about how people who come from different walks of life have to coexist to affect change."

Originally, LaDrina pointed toward the role of the film as a convening tool for productive conversations as her main objective in organizing the screenings.

"I WOULD SAY MY ORIGINAL OBJECTIVE WAS JUST TO CREATE A SPACE WHERE PEOPLE COULD COME TOGETHER, LEARN ABOUT WHAT HAS GOTTEN US TO THE POINT WHERE MASS INCARCERATION IS TODAY. AND JUST TO HAVE AN OPEN CONVERSATION AROUND WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? SO THAT WAS MY OBJECTIVE: BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER, HAVE A CONVERSATION."

—LaDrina Wilson, personal conversation



But after the screenings LaDrina said she observed many other direct examples of the power of film and such convenings. One justice-impacted individual told her that he felt so seen, humanized, and empowered by the film and screening event that he applied for early release in order to do more to help other people like him, **"His parole officer contacted me...to kind of vouch for them,"** she said. **"It's still pending. And since then he's gone to DC to lobby, and this is all because he decided to show up to a film."**

Among other tangible outcomes from the screenings, LaDrina pointed toward its role in building broader coalitions and bringing new people into community with each other, like student leaders working on criminal justice reform at the University of Iowa.



"I wanted 'just community folk' to see this. And so we just reached out to as many different organizations and people we know that thought would have some interest in this, and we asked them to do the same. And then we also had a panel discussion afterwards. And then I invited a politician and community leaders to talk about incarceration. Even though it's a film about federal incarceration, we wanted to talk about incarceration in general and the themes and topics that the documentary meant for us [locally]."

—Todd Cioffi, personal communication



"IT'S ABOUT HUMAN BEINGS AND HOW DO WE WANT TO LIVE TOGETHER."

—Todd Cioffi

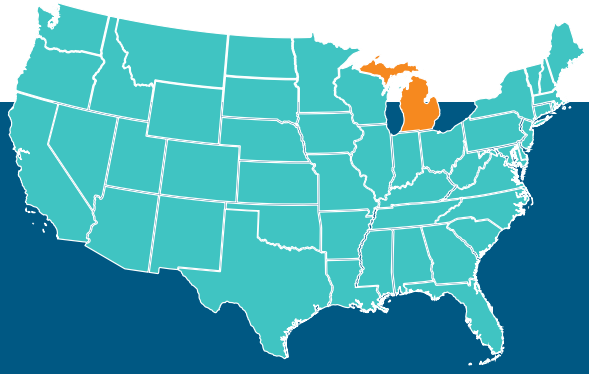
Todd said that the film helped to "humanize" people who have been incarcerated or struggled with drug addictions and other issues. "It just humanized everybody that we're, at the end of the day, we're talking about people who get incarcerated or somebody's brother or sister, somebody's son or daughter," he said.



"And yes, the law was broken and so forth, but at the end of the day, this is about people. It's about human beings and how do we want to live together?... This could be my neighbor, this could be someone, a coworker, this might be someone that I went to school with years ago. When we can begin to tap into that... that's a very moving experience. And I think that tends to be what changes people... I find that's when people begin to change their behaviors, the way they talk, the way they describe things, and even maybe so far as then they actually want to go out and change something. So I think that's the art of a good story, and can be used in a very powerful social way." —Todd Cioffi, personal conversation

For that reason, along with its focus on bipartisan collaboration, Todd said that he felt compelled to organize a wider group of people and organizations around the film. The use of documentary to convene coalition-building and community work was a first for Todd, and it opened his eyes to the power of such events.

MICHIGAN



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Grand Rapids, Lansing

LOCATIONS:
Movie theaters (Celebration Cinemas)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Calvin University, Safe & Just Michigan, Nation Outside, Dream.org JUSTICE

KEY INSIGHTS:
Community conversations, coalition building, bi-partisan engagement, academic partnerships, community interrogation and awareness



SUMMARY

FOR TODD CIOFFI, MANY OF THE ISSUES IN THE FILM WERE CENTRAL TO THE WORK HE HAS DONE FOR YEARS.



Todd is director of Calvin Prison Initiative at Calvin University, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and he is active with a consortium of other college prison education programs across the state. One of the initiatives that CPI offers is a five-year BA degree to incarcerated students in Michigan's prisons, through which they can earn a double-major degree in Faith and Community Leadership and Human Services. And then, upon graduation, they can actually serve in leadership roles while incarcerated.

When Todd found out about the film from film professor Samuel Smartt who initially screened the film on the Calvin campus during the fall of 2022, he was moved to help spread awareness of the film within his academic initiatives and participate in the panel discussion on campus. He still felt like the documentary needed a wider audience, and told the filmmakers that he would be willing to serve as a local screening partner. Todd eventually spearheaded a public screening at a popular local theater in Grand Rapids as part of the film's 2023 theatrical release.

"I'VE NEVER USED A DOCUMENTARY LIKE THIS BEFORE, BUT IT ALSO AWAKENED ME YET AGAIN TO THE POWER OF FILM IN GENERAL, THE POWER OF A STORY AND THE POWER OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT."

—Todd Cioffi, personal conversation

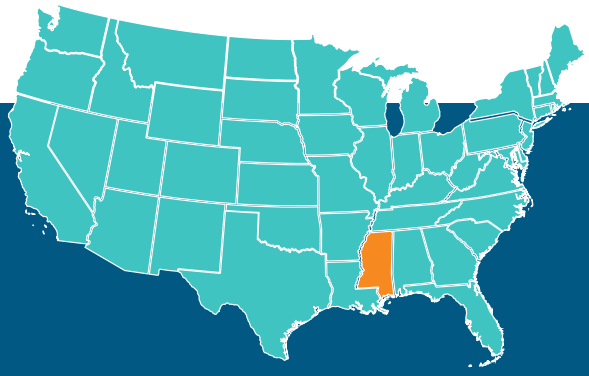
"I've never used a documentary like this before, but it also awakened me yet again to the power of film in general, the power of a story and the power of character development. So it's not just a film about federal prison reform, it's a film about Van Jones as well and what it takes to be so compassionate or so passionate and committed to a cause. And I found that very striking, as did students now when I think about when it was shown on campus, a lot of students really keyed into that idea that, 'Gosh, is there something that I could pursue in life that I could be that passionate and committed to?'" —Todd Cioffi, personal conversation

During the screening events, Todd said that he was surprised by how many instances he witnessed of people being personally touched and moved by the film, and by the degree of vulnerability that people shared in community conversations that followed.

"I didn't know what to expect. Sometimes when you have discussions after events like this, they tend to, especially at a University setting, they tend to be more academic, intellectual. Sometimes they kind of turn into a little mini debate on issues. And that just didn't happen. In both cases people responded in the best way, one would hope that they realized, gee, let's put aside some things for a minute and talk very honestly. And it generated discussions about our own setting, so about the conditions of incarceration in Michigan, or people opened-up about, 'well, I know this family and they have an incarcerated daughter or incarcerated son'. Sometimes, at the public event we had in the theater, somebody spoke and said: 'I have an incarcerated son.' And there's not often that you would be in a place where you'd feel free and open to say that, [because] it could be met with scorn and so forth. So I was surprised at the amount of openness and transparency that people showed in the discussions after the film."

—Todd Cioffi, personal communication

MISSISSIPPI



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Jackson, Ridgeland

LOCATIONS:
Community spaces, movie theaters (Malco Renaissance Cinema Grill), Prisons (Parchman State Penitentiary)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Various community leaders

KEY INSIGHTS:
Coalition building, community healing and awareness raising, prison partnerships, community empowerment, bi-partisan collaboration, community conversations

SUMMARY

IN MISSISSIPPI, SOON AFTER BEING RELEASED FROM PRISON HIMSELF UNDER THE FIRST STEP ACT, MAURICE CLIFTON LEARNED ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARY AND GOT THE IDEA TO SCREEN THE FILM IN PRISONS.

The First Step Act allowed Clifton to be released about 10 years early, in 2020, after having served 23 years in the federal prison system. Clifton's experience of being unjustly locked-up under an inhumane criminal drug law, which led to him receiving a 400-month sentence for a low-level, non-violent crime, as a first-time offender, is an example of the injustice being perpetrated, primarily against people of color, in the country's criminal justice system, especially in the state of Mississippi, which has the highest incarceration rate in the country.

Soon after being released, Clifton, who continues to work as a Chaplain at the Mississippi Department of Corrections, first met producer Lance Kramer through their mutual connections to Dream.org. Clifton first participated in a post-screening discussion at the local Oxford Film Festival in the Spring of 2022, and then took the initiative to organize a follow-up screening of the film in Parchman prison, one of the country's largest maximum-security prisons. Approximately fifty people currently incarcerated at Parchman who are part of the prison's seminary school participated in the screening. Clifton created and printed a ballot modeled after Oxford's audience ballots that he handed to each person so they could rate the film and talk about it afterward. Clifton said it became immediately clear

to him that the documentary was serving as a trusted source of information that could help educate people about important legislative rights and processes, and even help motivate people to become more involved in seeking change themselves.

The First Step Act does not automatically free anyone. Potentially eligible people in the federal prison system must prepare and present a motion in order to be considered for early release under the bill. This means that if people don't know that the new legislation exists, then they won't know if they are eligible, said Clifton. In that way, watching ***The First Step*** documentary can be the ticket that leads to their freedom. Following the initial successful prison screening organized by Clifton at Parchman, the Kramer brothers took the initiative to support additional screenings in prisons across the country — organized in partnership with other justice-impacted leaders working in prisons — where it also received the same favorable response from people in prisons in places like Arkansas and Washington, DC. After seeing the impact of the screenings first hand, Clifton became interested in supporting more screening events in community settings and colleges across the state. Many people in his community don't typically watch documentaries, he said, because day-to-day life takes precedence; and that is why community events involving films can be so important and powerful.

"Documentary is a good way to get information," said Clifton, who noted that scrolling through an article about The First Step Act doesn't come close to providing the same level of knowledge-building and understanding around criminal justice reform as a screening event does. **"But the way to get the message out is to have these open-ended, community discussions [after screenings]."**

After one screening at a movie theater in Ridgeland, Mississippi, organized as part of the film's 2023 theatrical release, Clifton said he was amazed with how many people were moved by the experience. **"A lot of people came to watch it, and a lot of people were moved to tears because they didn't know that this was happening in our own federal justice system, and they couldn't believe it."**

"It definitely opened a lot of people's eyes about the injustice that's going on... It changed a lot of people's perspectives. A lot of people call me and ask me [about the film], and I share it with a lot of people, and they tell me that they watched it. And I've been getting a lot of good feedback about it. It's not my film man, but it's the avenue. It's the key. You know, when people are incarcerated, we always talk about keys. That was the key that set me free. *The First Step* was the key that set me free. So I just think that the success of the film, the success of the film was to educate a lot of people and to continue to educate a lot of people. So I think that that's what it's doing. I think it's doing its job, it's just doing it at a slow pace. But change is difficult."

—Maurice Clifton, personal communication

"... THE WAY TO GET THE MESSAGE OUT IS TO HAVE THESE OPEN-ENDED, COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS [AFTER SCREENINGS]."

—Maurice Clifton

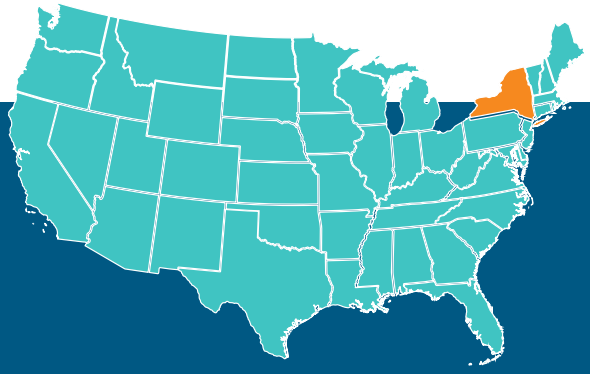
Clifton said that the film has been helpful in coalition building, because people from across state lines are now coming together through the screenings — and initiatives that followed it — to share knowledge and work together. And he says that the film's ability to help educate audiences to the scale of the social problem of mass incarceration has been profound. For Clifton, it's this education component that is the "key" to the film's power.

Clifton said the film and the work of Van Jones have also motivated him to work across party lines. If Jones had listened to the people in the film who told him not to collaborate with conservatives or activists who held different views and political stances than him, then Clifton said he would still be in prison.

"[THE DOCUMENTARY] OPENED MY EYES," HE SAID. "I CAN SIT AT THE TABLE WITH THE PEOPLE THAT DID ME WRONG. IF IT'S GOING TO MAKE IT BETTER FOR THE PEOPLE THAT'S BEHIND ME, IN THE FUTURE, WE CAN SIT DOWN AND HAVE A DISCUSSION ABOUT CHANGE NO MATTER WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN... THE MOTIVATION THAT THIS FILM GAVE ME, YOU KNOW, IS TO WORK WITH OTHER PEOPLE."



NEW YORK



DATE:
February–June 2023

COMMUNITIES:
New York

LOCATIONS:
Movie theater (DCTV Firehouse)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Justice Film Festival, REFORM Alliance, Dream.org JUSTICE, Social Justice Network, Reentry Essentials, Inc, Let's Give a Damn, Meridian Hill Pictures

KEY INSIGHTS:
Dynamic community screening events, coalition building, new reports for policy reform at state level, new partnerships, new movement building around criminal justice reform between organizations, raising public awareness around policy reform and re-entry and rehabilitation support programs, bipartisan collaborationcollaboration, community conversations

SUMMARY

THE FIRST OF THE COMMUNITY SCREENINGS OBSERVED IN THIS STUDY TOOK PLACE IN NEW YORK CITY AT THE FIREHOUSE CINEMA IN CHINATOWN, DURING THE SOLD-OUT OPENING WEEKEND OF THE FILM'S THEATRICAL RELEASE IN FEBRUARY 2023.

A post-screening panel discussion included the film's director Brandon Kramer, producer Lance Kramer, along with representatives from several local organizations who were engaged in issues related to criminal justice reform, addiction, and community work, and a protagonist from the film.

One of the main panelists who spoke at the opening screening was Louis L. Reed. Louis played a central role in working with Van Jones to advance the First Step Act, and his efforts are featured in the film ***The First Step.*** As someone who is justice-impacted himself, and who has served fourteen years in federal prisons, Louis brings a wealth of personal experience and connections to the work of helping others with re-entry and recovery based services, among other advocacy work. He also played a lead role, through his position at the time of filming as Director of National Organizing & Partnerships for Dream Corps JUSTICE (formerly #cut50), in growing the nation's largest bi-partisan grassroots advocacy and organizing coalition through the Empathy Network. Louis joined the screening event not only as someone who was featured in the film, but as a representative of REFORM Alliance, a nonprofit organization dedicated to probation, parole, and sentencing reform in the United States through legislation and lobbying.

For Louis, one of the most influential roles that the documentary is playing is its use as an "out of the box disruptive organizing tool."

> **"Everybody is kind of in their silos and nobody is actually listening to one another. We all want to be heard, but nobody's listening to each other. And so I think that what this film did was not only just show people how to listen, but also tactfully. I think that it also highlighted how when you want to get something done, you have to work with unlikely allies for common interests."**
>
> **—Louis L. Reed,** personal communication

During the New York event, and in multiple other events he participated in across the country, Louis said that he saw the role that documentary can play in bringing communities — no matter where they are in the country — into "the rooms of power brokers in DC in a way that folks may not have otherwise had access to." And by bringing the film into a collaborative space, Louis said that it can be used to bring a focus more on outcomes rather than outrage. In this way, the film is able to be used as a powerful organizing tool that helps not only build empathetic understanding but also empower collective solution building.

"I think that when you are able to show people who, I mean to cinematically show people not anything scripted, unscripted content, people who are on polar opposites of an issue sit together, come together, read from the same hymnal, sing from the same note, and that harmony can effectuate change. That's the power of this film. And films like this, documentary filmmaking, it's not anything scripted. It's not anything as to where you can control what the outcomes are going to be, right? We didn't know what the outcomes were going to be. We just had cameras in front of us that captured that, and whatever the outcomes were going to be, we were going to have to show that to the world." —Louis L. Reed, personal conversation





By allowing communities to see unscripted collaboration in this way, it demystifies the collaborative process — and shows how people can affect major change if they work together — and can inspire other people to get involved as well.

This point was also raised by Terrence Coffie, who spent 19 years incarcerated and since returning home has worked as a professor at New York University, a youth advocate, and community leader on a host of important social issues. He supported multiple screenings at DCTV in New York as the Founder and CEO of the Social Justice Network, a grassroots organization that raises awareness surrounding criminal, racial and social justice reform.

"I think that the first thing that really drew me to this screening is my work in the field of criminal justice. Outside of my role as a professor at New York University, I'm also an advocate on criminal justice reform in America as a whole; and I'm also a formerly incarcerated citizen who was impacted by this legislation. So I understood firsthand."

—Terrence Coffie, personal communication

"...THOSE CONVERSATIONS LED TO ACTUAL CHANGES..."

—Terrence Coffie

Terrence emphasized that the screenings that took place around ***The First Step*** led to further actions and movements that far exceeded the conversations — albeit meaningful — that took place in the theaters.

"There were very robust, insightful, and meaningful dialogues that took place. And not only that, those conversations led to actual changes...we built a coalition out of these [conversations since the screenings]...So much so that a collective group now will be participating in a collective action to host the screening at various academic institutions here in New York, which I'll be spearheading. I'm grateful for that, particularly at institutions that are focused on policy reform...from that, we built the coalition surrounding this in support of the First Step Act. At the end of the year, we're going to be submitting an annual report to the new director of the prison, the Borough of Prisons, because if you've been following the news, we know there still has been some complications with the calculation of how do we begin to institute that at the federal level, but also utilizing that same template for state leaders. So we'll be submitting that report on what we've seen as academia stakeholders as a collective, as a collaborative group." —Terrence Coffie, personal conversation

In addition, Terrence, who is also a part of the faculty with New York University's Prison Education program, pointed out that the 'Close Rikers' campaign is taking place because:

"WE ARE LOOKING AT HOW THAT PARTICULAR JAIL OVER INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL, WHICH FUEL OUR STATE PRISON, ET CETERA, ET CETERA. SO WITH THAT HAPPENING AND WHAT'S HAPPENING AT THE STATE LEVEL, THERE WAS AN EXPANSION OF PROGRAMS WITHIN OUR STATE PRISONS HERE... WHICH IS A BIG STEP FORWARD. SO IT'S STEPS LIKE THAT THAT I HOPE THAT WE CONTINUE TO MAKE. AND THAT REALLY SPEAKS TO THE ISSUE, NOT JUST ABOUT THE ISSUE."

—Terrence Coffie, personal conversation

Among the most important objectives and outcomes of the screening, Terrence said that its role in raising public awareness around both policy reform and re-entry and rehabilitation support programs for justice-impacted people is critical.

"There are a lot of programs that seek to address over-incarceration in their states and programs. So that was the purpose, to really get the community audience individuals involved in creating change and supporting legislation that would increase funding for re-entry programs that will support efforts to shut down prisons and initiate more reentry programs and rehabilitative programs, which was probably one of the most challenging aspects of this. And through those conversations, this is where this happened for me, and I'm not even just talking about audience members, I'm talking about my goal was to invite elected officials who were part of our various committees on criminal justice here in New York State and California, and various spaces that I hosted this."
—Terrence Coffie, personal conversation



One participant in a panel discussion at a DCTV screening, Janos Marton, chief advocacy officer for Dream.org and a 2024 candidate for Manhattan District Attorney, said that he thinks documentaries — especially ***The First Step*** — provide a unique contribution to advancing an effective 'theory of change' when it comes to reform.

> **"Even if zero people took action, I mean, I think the reason we like working with Lance and this film is not only because our organization was involved with this bill, but because the theory of change, it sort of the espouses, which is that even when political times are dire, there's a way to forge common ground consensus that is very central to our theory of change. And so I think even if nobody took action, there'll still be value to people seeing it."**
>
> **—Janos Martin,** personal communication

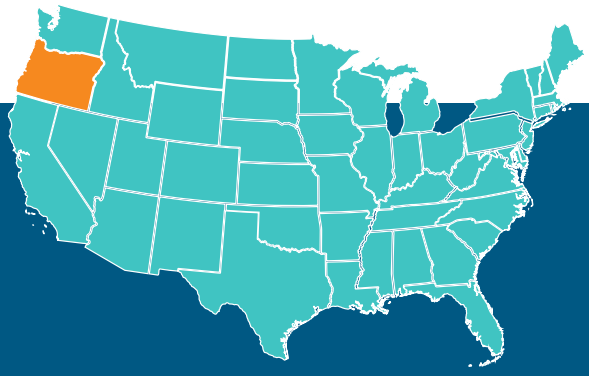
Janos said that the ability to help people "see" and better understand the nuances and consequences of the criminal justice system is critical.

"Unless you've been directly impacted by the criminal justice system, a lot of people are not aware of how prison works, how prison policy works, what people are doing to change it. And so I think in general, film is a really good educator." —Janos Martin, personal communication





OREGON



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Bend, Portland

LOCATIONS:
Movie theaters (Cinema 21), university spaces

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Dream.org JUSTICE, Classroom Law, SAGE, Oregon State University, NAACP

KEY INSIGHTS:
Advocating for policy, coalition-building, community building, community conversations



SUMMARY

IN OREGON, A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE CAME TOGETHER TO PLAN MULTIPLE SCREENINGS, INCLUDING A SCREENING AT PORTLAND'S HISTORIC CINEMA 21, AS PART OF THE FILM'S THEATRICAL RELEASE THAT SURPASSED THE EXPECTATIONS OF SOME OF ITS ORGANIZERS.

The screening was sponsored by the local NAACP chapter and engaged a diverse panel of community members that included women who were formerly incarcerated and who spoke about their experiences both in prison and as criminal justice reform advocates since their return home. And while many of the participants identified as politically progressive, they reflected wide-ranging points of view and identities, including people who might not typically work together on an issue, recalled one of the filmmakers. The event engaged with a wide variety of challenges related to criminal justice and addiction, including issues of race, policies, politics, and coalition building.

For instance, Steve Higgs, who played a significant role with outreach and in organizing efforts around the Portland screening, found himself surprised at how moved he was as a participant in the audience. Steve works as the executive director of Sage, a nonprofit organization that focuses on raising awareness around issues of equity and important challenges facing future generations. He said that he was amazed at how different it felt for him to watch the film in a community setting, rather than his home.



"I'D SEEN THAT FILM TWICE BEFORE ON MY HOME COMPUTER IN THE BASEMENT. AND THERE IS REALLY A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE A FILM TOGETHER...IT'S JUST A BETTER EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU SHARE IT WITH OTHERS..."

—**Steve Higgs,** personal conversation

"I'd seen that film twice before on my home computer in the basement. And there is really a different experience when you experience a film together... It's just a better experience when you share it with others. And that's probably one thing I noticed that I probably wasn't paying attention to until I actually experienced it. And so it's special. I think that's what makes a film night special because we can all go back and separately analyze these things in the comforts of our own home and draw our conclusions from a documentary. But there's a real difference when you're doing that in community with other people." —Steve Higgs, personal conversation

Steve said that the labor which goes into organizing screening events so that people are interested and show-up is considerable. But it's worth it, he says, because it is difficult to find a tool more effective than film — alongside a carefully constructed post-screening panel or conversation — in helping people to expand their perspectives on an issue and connect with one another in a new way.

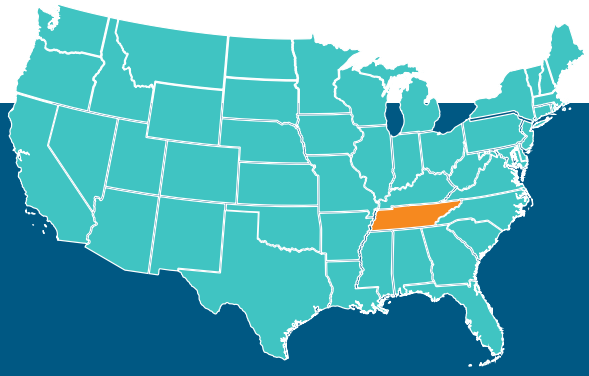
"The panel that they formed: it opened my mind to things I had honestly never thought about before. For example, they had I think two or three speakers associated with a women's prison in Oregon called Coffee Creek. And they told stories about what it is like to be in prison, what's it like to give birth while you're in the prison. And things like that that I had never thought about my whole life. And so that's the one thing: both the substance on the screen that was discussed in the movie, but also just the human stories that were shared right after the movie that I found to be eye-opening."

—Steve Higgs, personal communication





TENNESSEE



DATE:
February 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Memphis, Nashville

LOCATIONS:
Movie theaters (Studio on the Square, Darkhorse Theater)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Lifeline to Success, Dismas House, Unheard Voices in Nashville, Destiny Theater Experience

KEY INSIGHTS:
Coalition building, community conversation, advocacy, legislative reform, bi-partisan collaboration, government partnership, community organizing

SUMMARY

VINESSA BROWN, DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT FOR LIFELINE TO SUCCESS, A COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION IN MEMPHIS DEDICATED TO HELPING PEOPLE RETURN HOME AFTER PRISON, SAID THAT THE WORK THEY DID ORGANIZING A SCREENING OF THE FIRST STEP AT THE MALCO THEATER AS PART OF THE FILM'S 2023 THEATRICAL RELEASE WAS PROBABLY "THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE YEAR" FOR HER AND HER ORGANIZATION.



Brown has many justice-impacted people in her family — including her husband, who is her co-founder with Lifeline to Success — so she has seen up close and firsthand the barriers and challenges of people who struggle with re-entry and success after incarceration. She said that the screening events they organized around the film have provided unparalleled opportunities for her and her organization to connect with other community members — including city council members, young people, police department officials, Van Jones's family members (who live in a nearby community), criminal justice reformers, and community members from both sides of the political aisle — to come together and both "listen" and "talk" about solutions to many of the criminal justice issues that are directly relevant to them.

"It was like a woosh moment when [the film] started, something came over that whole entire building and it was just like, man, this is cool man. We're not by ourselves. Thank you Van for stepping out and thank you for bringing people from all different walks of life together to talk about something that no one ever thinks that we have in common. When we talk about people who don't have a criminal past that were sitting in the room, it allowed them to think differently. It allowed them to listen. And I think that's the biggest problem. Everyone thinks they know it all, but something you just have to listen and consume and then share what you think if someone else shares what they think and then you come up with the best solution. So that's what it did.

It allowed us to be able to sit at the table with a bunch of different people and our group to say, this is our walk. Another group to say, you know what? I almost had the same walk but I wasn't incarcerated, but this is how I feel. And they also got to sit down and realize. And these are the non-former felons that everyone assumed that when you served your time, that life just rolled back and it didn't. So this was an eye-opener for us. We had two of our city council people that were in the room and we had one law enforcement person, and that also brought us to the table to talk differently and say, 'how do we make a change in our verbiage in how we talk about criminal justice reform?' How do we sit down with judges and say: 'Hey, have you ever thought about doing this for somebody because you looked into their past and found out it wasn't an easy walk from them?'"

—Vinessa Brown, personal communication

"IT ALLOWED US TO BE ABLE TO SIT AT THE TABLE WITH A BUNCH OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND OUR GROUP TO SAY, 'THIS IS OUR WALK.'" **—Vinessa Brown**



Since the event, Vinessa says that they have tried to apply the tools they learned from the film and the community conversation to improve what they do — this includes making more frequent visits to government offices and pushing for improved legislation.

"I thought I was doing a great job until I saw that movie. I do a lot of advocacy locally and I do a lot of advocacy in other states, so we'll get together and talk about with partners things, but now my feet are planted in Nashville and I learned how just to sit in a room and listen and not open my mouth and gather information and then bring it back to my whole team and my team from other states and see what's the next step. So yeah, I make more trips to Nashville than I ever have since watching that. I don't get discouraged as quickly because I watched [Van] get beat down, I'll tell you that. And so I'm not in my feelings anymore when I walk up there and legislators will tell you an untruth. That's a nice way to say it. And I've also learned that relationships not just in my community, but relationships at the legislator are important, and that's with their office folks, not just with my senators and my congressmen and all that, but their office folks, because the office folks are the ones who really run it. It helped me and I put a drive into my husband. So since he's the founder, he was offered a position with our county reentry office and it opened his eyes to politics, which is never a good thing, but he fights in a different way working with the government, and he hasn't changed the way he is. He just knows what steps to take and what games can be played. So this was a great toolkit for us."

—**Vinessa Brown,** personal communication

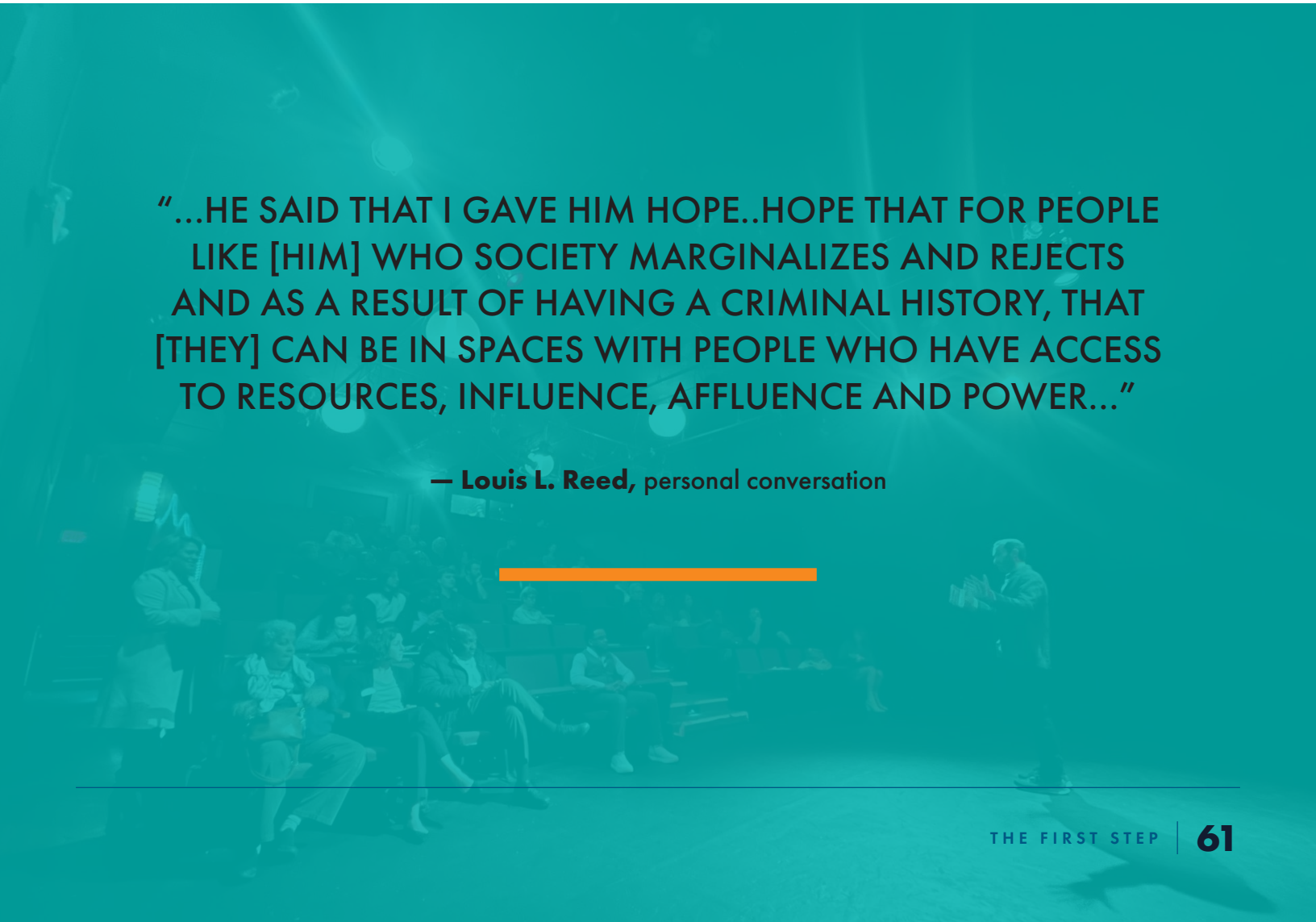




Vinessa said that every screening created a new emotional experience, including when Van Jones's family surprised everyone by attending one of the screenings and sharing personal stories with the community afterward. Despite her years of work, there are moments that were created because of the screening events that she said she will never forget.

Similarly, Louis L. Reed, a protagonist in the film who has traveled to support about twenty screening events in communities across the country since the film was released, said that, out of all the screenings, the most memorable was the screening he attended in Nashville, Tennessee as part of the film's 2023 theatrical release, held at the Darkhorse Theater and organized by Dismas House, with support from local community leaders Shawn Whitsell and Christina Arquette.

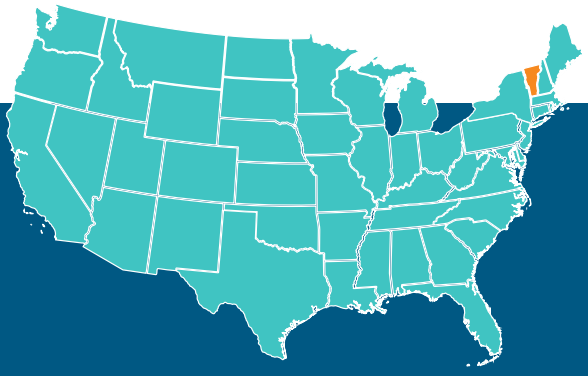
"The reason why that sticks out to me a little bit more is because there was someone who approached me afterwards. He had just served a significant portion of time in prison and he had tears in his eyes and he said he got transferred from federal custody into state custody, not only as a result of the First Step Act, but he had heard about my advocacy prior to being released from the federal custody into the state custody. And he was saying how he had been a virtual admirer of my career. And he said that I gave him hope. And I asked him. 'I was like, what kind of hope?' He was like, 'Man, just hope that for people like us who society marginalizes and rejects and as a result of having a criminal history, that we can be in spaces with people who have access to resources, influence, affluence and power.' And that was really, it wasn't the screening so much more so it was more so for me than it was about just that personal touch and that personal connection."
—Louis L. Reed, personal conversation



"...HE SAID THAT I GAVE HIM HOPE..HOPE THAT FOR PEOPLE LIKE [HIM] WHO SOCIETY MARGINALIZES AND REJECTS AND AS A RESULT OF HAVING A CRIMINAL HISTORY, THAT [THEY] CAN BE IN SPACES WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE ACCESS TO RESOURCES, INFLUENCE, AFFLUENCE AND POWER..."

— Louis L. Reed, personal conversation

VERMONT



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Lincoln, Bristol

LOCATIONS:
Public library (Lincoln Public Library), theaters

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Lincoln Public Library, medical professionals

KEY INSIGHTS:
Creating a space for emotional community conversations, new partnership building, supportive services



SUMMARY

WHEN BRIAN BATES, A RESIDENT OF THE SMALL RURAL TOWN OF LINCOLN, VERMONT LEARNED ABOUT THE FILM, HE MOVED TO ORGANIZE A SCREENING AT HIS COMMUNITY LIBRARY.

He works as a doctor at a community health center in the neighboring town of Bristol with a population of about 4,000 people, with much of his work related to addiction, and he said that he also tries to be active in his community on issues related to poverty, addiction, community conversation and politics. Given the documentary's focus on many of these issues, Brian said that he felt compelled to support a local screening.



"SO AT THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN OUR TOWN, I SPOKE WITH [THE LIBRARY STAFF] AND CHOSE A NIGHT TO SHOW THE FILM. AND THEN ESSENTIALLY I GATHERED A PANEL OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERTISE AND PERSPECTIVE ON SOME OF THE ISSUES PRESENTED IN THE FILM, PARTICULARLY AS IT PERTAINED TO OUR COMMUNITY AND OUR STATE OF VERMONT."

—Brian Bates, personal conversation

As part of the panel, Brian recruited a member of the state's attorney's office and a person who runs a restorative justice program in his county. Brian said that it was the first time he had ever organized something like this. The initial hope, he recalled, was simply to bring people in his community together to talk about important issues related to addiction and restorative justice. "My specific objective wasn't more than having a good conversation and helping community members to engage in issues," he said. And in the end, he felt like the documentary provided the perfect organizing tool for this objective.

"One thing that I think that documentary The First Step does very well is it leaves a lot of room for conversation related to the issues that it presents. It doesn't simply present a straightforward thesis and tell you why that thesis is correct. Instead it presents complex issues and gives voice to different perspectives. And that I think really was a good prompt for really, really deep conversation after the film."

—Brian Bates, personal communication



Brian said that he has been part of important conversations around addiction before, but that the storytelling aspect of a documentary, along with the opportunity that a shared community screening and discussion around a story can bring, is uniquely powerful.

"I've been involved in a lot of conversations with various groups around approaches to addiction in our community and advocacy around particular things or discussion of the school system around addiction and resources and just medical care...But I think it's uniquely [powerful] to incorporate storytelling into it because there's also, there's the kind of entertainment component of it too, and that people like watching a film and feel engrossed in that narrative and the visual and then having the conversation as well. I think it works. It works better than, let's say just gathering community members with the prompt of, let's have a conversation around issues of incarceration or addiction in our community." —Brian Bates, personal communication

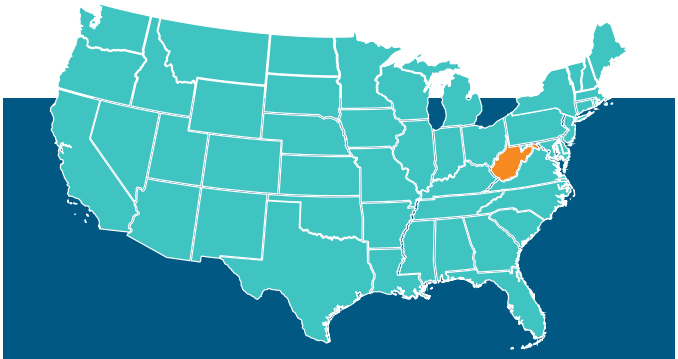
Similar to the experience shared in other communities, Brian said that his experience showed him how storytelling can tap into "an emotional element" that exceeds a mere "intellectual conversation" about important issues in his community. And, as a result, he witnessed community members opening up to one another in powerful new ways.

"I'm realizing that I think storytelling taps into an emotional element that is very different than just having an intellectual conversation. And I think when those two things are coupled together, the emotional and intellectual, that there's more depth and connection...there were a couple community members who shared stories about losing loved ones to addiction or their own struggles with addiction. And that just really, really deepens the conversation because we're not just talking about characters presented in the film, which were very impactful, but really centering it on experiences in our own circles... And what a story ideally does is allow the viewer or listener to build the humanity of all the characters involved, all the people presented. That doesn't mean a person walks away from a story agreeing with the perspectives that they are heard, but hopefully it pushes the conversation into a space that's more humane." —Brian Bates, personal conversation

While Brian said his vision for the event was primarily around creating a conversation, he learned of several participants forming new partnerships with the panelists and other people they met at the event, including supporting the volunteer efforts of a participating restorative justice organization. He said that community members who shared emotional stories also revealed that they didn't know about the local organizations who could provide them support until meeting with their representatives at the event.



WEST VIRGINIA



DATE:
June 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Berkeley Springs, Martinsburg

LOCATIONS:
Movie theater (Apollo Civic Theater)

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
Mayors office of Martinsburg; Sheriff's Office of Berkeley County; Office of Community Corrections of Berkeley County; Bikers Against Heroin-WVA Chapter; and several other grassroots organizations and leaders

KEY INSIGHTS:
Community healing, community conversation, coalition building, fundraising, grassroots advocacy, education and awareness raising, law-enforcement training, bi-partisan collaboration

SUMMARY

IN A POIGNANT MOMENT IN THE FILM, ONE OF THE MAIN PARTICIPANTS, DOUGLAS COPENHAVER, OPENS UP AND SHARES THE FACT THAT HE LOST HIS SON TO ADDICTION.



Douglas reflects on the way the addiction crisis is ravaging West Virginia and that this difficult experience motivated his desire to push for needed increased support for addiction recovery, criminal justice reforms and coalition building documented in ***The First Step.***

During a screening of the film in his home town of Martinsburg, Douglas spoke in greater detail about the full story of his son's death. In the local historic theater, in the center of town, he sat on the edge of the stage in front of a room of about 100 community members. Douglas channeled his late son and over a monologue that lasted nearly twenty minutes, he attempted to tell the story of his last moments through his son's perspective. Douglas said that the experience was "cathartic" and "healing," more than anything else he had experienced since his son died more than a decade ago.

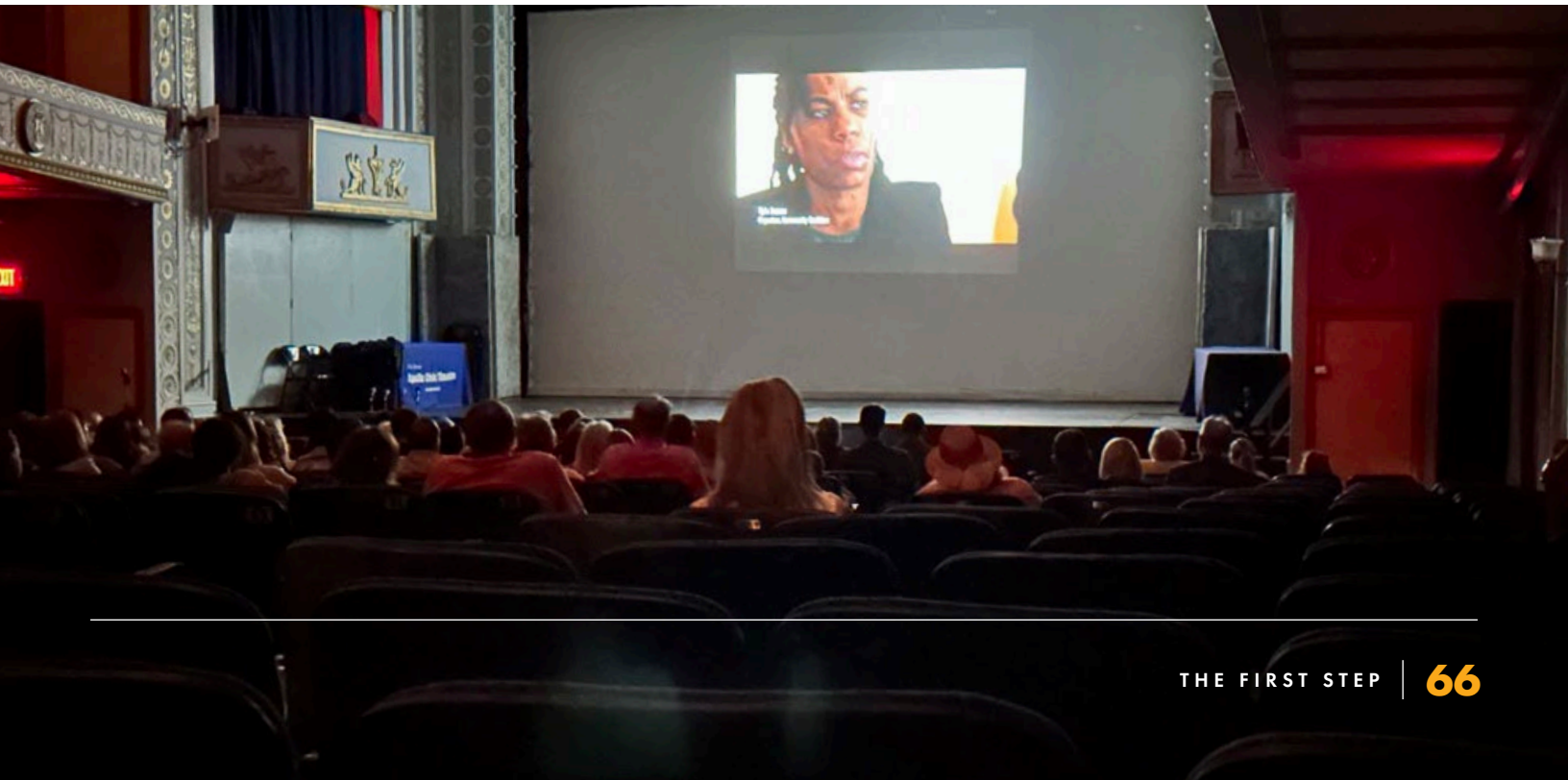
Following the screening of the film, a larger discussion centered around how various local partners and organizations — including local addiction and treatment organizations, the police department, and other city officials — could help connect with more community members who could use their support. Individual community members shared their own stories of addiction struggles and about loved ones they lost to addiction, without knowing about what services were out there to support them. Beyond expanding coalitions, multiple community members said the event itself served as a space for community healing that they said they had never experienced before.

Further ripples from this event and others in West Virginia continued after the screening. Following the Martinsburg screening, one of the community members in attendance spoke about how moving the experience was to her friend, Beverly Sharp (who goes by "Bev").

Bev is the founder and executive director of The Reach Initiative, a West-Virginia based organization that provides collaborative community support for justice impacted people in order to help them overcome reentry barriers and access helpful services and resources. Before founding the initiative, Bev worked in the United States Department of Justice, in its Federal Bureau of Prisons, for 30 years. After retiring, she worked on the West Virginia Council of Churches Prison and Jail Ministry Committee, but after attending meetings for some time she decided that she wanted to do more to help justice impacted people with reentry support. Since then, the organization has received major funding support and has expanded its work across the state. In addition to her community building work, Bev hosts workshops that, among other goals, educates communities about the multi-faceted — and interconnected — nature of the opioid epidemic and incarceration, along with how West Virginia became the most incarcerated nation in the world with the highest recidivism rate.

"So we've just started working in that landscape of what can we do to change some of this," said Bev. "And part of that is educating the public, educating the faith community, educating legislators. We are sometimes called on as subject matter experts to testify at legislative hearings. Not in a lobby aspect, but in an aspect to educate people."

—Bev Sharp, personal communication, 10/27/2023



After learning about the film ***The First Step,*** Bev thought that it could play an integral role in their ground-level advocacy work and engagements with communities in West Virginia. Bev said that many people have no idea how laws are made, and there are not high expectations on what can be achieved through legislation in a way that will actually have a positive impact on the lives of everyday people.

"But watching *The First Step* will give them a flavor of how you can bring people together, even if they don't agree, even if they're not the same party, even if they're from opposite ends of the country, bringing people together to find common ground and say: 'Hey, you know what? Here's something that we really need to look at.' And taking the political factor out of it and putting the human factor into it, I think for them to be able to see that 'hey, this can happen.' Even at the national level that is pretty much politically the same as the state of West Virginia. So at least gives them a little hope about getting involved in advocacy work and knowing who your legislator is, knowing who your local officials are, your county commissioners, your mayors, the county jail bills in West Virginia are in the millions of dollars. And so there's constantly attacks on the homeless, on recovery houses. So knowing how to approach those people, [and support them] to tell your story, because most people that are involved in this work have a story, and using that story to be able to show the human side of this and not just spew out statistics or numbers or what might happen, what could happen, but what actually does happen in their work day to day."

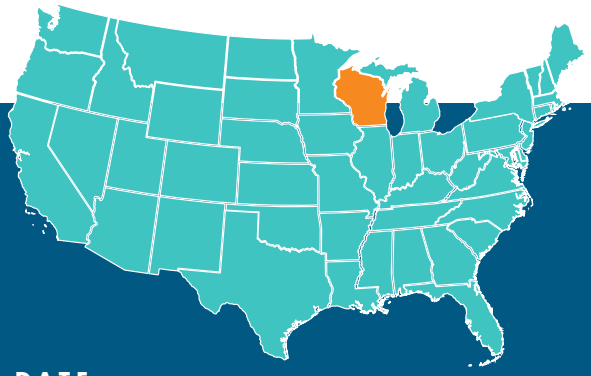
—**Bev Sharp,** personal communication, 10/27/2023

Bev connected with producer Lance Kramer and collaboratively developed a framework for screening The First Step across the state of West Virginia to engage local leaders and "reentry councils" that compose local organizations serving justice-impacted people. As part of their screening events, Bev and her organization are also inviting a former commissioner of corrections in West Virginia, professors, state Senators, and community leaders, among others to help create productive conversations around what more can be done in their communities. Inspired by the progress created as a result of ***The First Step*** film, Bev is also working to create a documentary film herself in order to help motivate further understandings and engagements around the work that her organization is doing in West Virginia.





WISCONSIN



DATE:
March 2023

COMMUNITIES:
Madison, Milwaukee

LOCATIONS:
Movie theater (The Oriental Theatre), University spaces

ORGANIZING PARTNERS:
The Community, Milwaukee Film, UW-South Madison Partnership

KEY INSIGHTS:
bi-paritsanship collaboration, community conversations, coalition building, community building, connecting community members with politicians, legislative reform.



SUMMARY

WHILE THE OPENING OF THIS REPORT PROVIDED A DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF ONE OF THE MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN SCREENING EVENTS, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT AMONG THE PANELISTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THAT SCREENING WAS SENATOR JESSE JAMES, A REPUBLICAN STATE SENATOR IN WISCONSIN AND A LAW ENFORCEMENT PROFESSIONAL WHO HAD NEVER PARTICIPATED BEFORE IN AN EVENT LIKE IT.

Senator James watched the film and then decided to participate in a conversation after the screening with other members of the community, including Democratic state representatives and progressive community leaders, on the importance of bi-partisan collaboration and the need to continue making progress on criminal justice reform. Senator James is a formerly incarcerated white Republican who says that he is often mischaracterized, and that films like ***The First Step*** — and the community conversations they open-up — are helping to provide important spaces for greater recognition and community building among people who wouldn't necessarily share the same space or collective effort otherwise.

"I HAVE TO SAY, SOMETIMES PEOPLE PRE-JUDGE INDIVIDUALS BECAUSE OF A PARTY THAT THEY MAY BE AFFILIATED WITH. AND SOMETIMES WE GET TITLES THAT ARE TOTALLY OFF BASE, ESPECIALLY IF THEY DON'T KNOW. AND I'M GOING TO SPEAK ABOUT MYSELF AS AN INDIVIDUAL."

—Jesse James, personal conversation

During our interview, Senator James spoke about his struggle with poverty as a child and about his difficulties growing up in a home with domestic abuse, along with alcohol and drug abuse. He also shared his experiences with incarceration and struggles after serving in the military, and the importance of looking for the humanity in all people regardless of what they look like or the political party they affiliate themselves with.

He said that the screening event he joined in Milwaukee was the first time he had ever participated in a community documentary screening event. And that, while he had apprehension at first, it opened his eyes to the possibilities that it can create.



"This was the first time I participated in something like this, and I will not lie, I was very apprehensive. I was a little bit fearful because this is where the political part comes out. Republicans just don't do stuff like this. We don't participate in these types [of events] because we're just going to get thrown to the wolves and we're just going to get badgered and attacked. And I'm not like that type of person. I'm used to being put into situations that are uncomfortable, especially being in the law enforcement world for 21 years, I responded to numerous incidents that were very uncomfortable, and you have to be the one to be able to sit there and listen and mediate, negotiate, compromise, and then come and really you have to do some type of judgment as far as what actions are you going to take up to and including making an arrest and being able to have that life experience and being able to have an open mind to listen, to hear to things that, oh my goodness, this is going to be so uncomfortable. It was a great event. It was a great conversation afterwards."

—Jesse James, personal communication

During and after the event, Jesse said that he connected with community members — including state representatives from the Democratic party — in order to better explore ways that they can work together to move legislation forward that can help create more positive reforms around criminal justice.

Behind all of the screenings organized in Wisconsin — which also included an event on the University of Wisconsin-South Madison Partnership campus — was Shannon Ross, who is part of the Dream.org Justice Empathy Network, and part of the storytelling and criminal justice reform organization Represent Justice, along with an organization called Unity, among other initiatives focused on improving narratives and helping justice-impacted people become better prepared for what follows prison when they return home. Shannon is also the founder of a community organization called 'The Community', which produces a newsletter that is read by an estimated half of the Wisconsin prison population (the most read publication in the Wisconsin prison system). Shannon is also justice-impacted himself, and he helped organize the Wisconsin screenings a few years after being released from a 17-year sentence. Shannon said he was drawn to Van Jones' style of nonpartisan leadership and dedication to changing larger narratives, policies and systems. And since Shannon's organization already does regular screenings of other films, he felt that ***The First Step*** fit in perfectly with the work they were already doing. He said that the events that were held around ***The First Step*** exemplified the bi-partisan work that he says is so hard but important to do — he recalled being amazed by the level of engagement displayed by politicians who attended, including Senator Jesse James, who he met at the event and has since had subsequent policy meetings and discussions with him as a result.

> **"So the thing that I think stood out for me, the first event we had, there were some pretty notable people on our panels that we had. We had a mix of Republicans and Democrats. We had somebody who just recently had run for Senate and lost to Ron Johnson in the state here. We had the foremost reform politician in Wisconsin. And one of the panels he was talking about how he was kind of sitting there tearing up watching the movie because he was connecting with a lot of Van's struggles in the movie because his work has been a lonely road as well here trying to get a lot of things changed and there's not a lot of support for it all the time... That was telling to have him talk about the impact the movie had on him, just watching it to then have at our Madison event, one of the Republican senators [Jesse James] ... also connected with the topic and then with me afterwards, really wanted to lean in and meet and we met later."**
>
> **—Shannon Ross,** personal communication

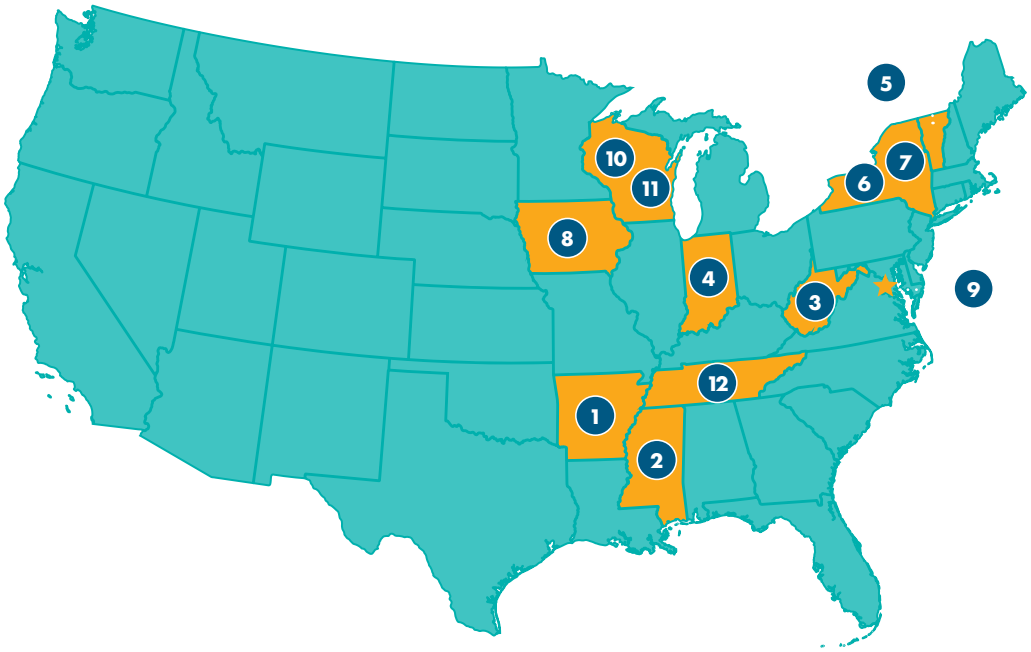
Following the Milwaukee screening, Shannon said that he met with Senator James in his office, and he felt that the Republican Senator displayed a genuine interest in learning more about the work Shannon was doing. Shannon was optimistic about what their unlikely partnership could lead to.



MAKING RIPPLES

Spotlight Examples of Community Screening Ripple Effects

The additional screenings, conversations, and actions that take place after a documentary screening are rarely documented, because it's usually very difficult to know what any audience member does with their experience after they exit a theater or event. But these ripples are critical to understanding the importance and potential of screenings. To encourage further investigations into these long tail changes and influence, this report offers the following examples of impact ripples captured by this research:



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1 ARKANSAS

In Arkansas — a student attended a screening in Little Rock and informed their professor, who teaches a drug policy course, about the film. That connection led the instructor to partner with a student organization and to organize their own community screening — in partnership with several local community leaders — and to raise money for a grassroots harm reduction organization in their area.

2 MISSISSIPPI

In Mississippi — one screening inspired a community member who had been released under the The First Step Act to support convening additional prison and community screenings of the film.

3 WEST VIRGINIA

In West Virginia — after a community screening participant told a friend about the film and screening event she joined, that friend (who runs a West-Virginia based organization that provides collaborative community support for justice impacted people) looked into the film and realized it would be a perfect convening tool for their work. She then organized their own set of screenings across the state — involving legislators and community leaders statewide — and is working on a new documentary of their own to help raise further awareness of the experiences and needs of justice impacted people across the state.

4 INDIANA

In Indiana — a community screening prompted a participating law enforcement officer to organize additional trainings (organized around the film) in a police department in Muncie, Indiana.

5 VERMONT

In Vermont — one library screening led to community members volunteering to support local restorative justice organizations and efforts in their community.

6 NEW YORK

In New York — after a theatrical screening, a collective effort began to host additional screenings at various academic institutions in New York City, which are being spearheaded by a justice-impacted participant of one of the original screenings.

7 NEW YORK

In New York — further coalition building after the New York theatrical screenings has contributed to the creation of an annual report, produced by academic stakeholders as a collective group, that will be submitted to the director of the Borough of Prisons in New York.

8 IOWA

In Iowa — a justice-impacted participant felt so seen and empowered by a community screening event that he has since traveled to DC to advocate for others like him (something he had never done before) and he has asked his parole office for early release from supervision in order to do more community and advocacy work for other justice impacted individuals.

9 WASHINGTON D.C.

In Washington D.C. — after the executive director of the Center for Inspired Teaching, a social change-focused organization that aims to transform "the school experience from compliance-based to engagement-based," watched the film, she was so moved that they decided to build an entire curriculum around the film — including a series of additional screenings — for use by high school students and schools across the country.

10 WISCONSIN

In Wisconsin — following a screening event that involved a Republican State Senator and a Democrat State Representative, the two legislators have strengthened their government partnership. The screening, which was the first time the Republican Senator had ever participated in a documentary-centered community event like it, has led to improved bi-partisan conversations between legislators across the political spectrum.

11 WISCONSIN

In Wisconsin — a progressive community leader, and founder of the community group *The Community*, formed a new connection with a Republican senator because of a screening event, and they have had subsequent meetings around criminal justice reform as a result. They are optimistic about where their unlikely partnership, formed because of a screening event, will lead.

12 TENNESSEE

In Tennessee — a grassroots criminal justice reform organization has changed its ways of working as a result of the film, and a screening event they organized around it. Since the film they have increased their trips to legislative offices and they have increased their coalition-building efforts dramatically.

CONCLUSION

THIS STUDY REVEALS HOW A SERIES OF COMMUNITY SCREENING EVENTS AROUND *THE FIRST STEP* OFFERED AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF DISTRIBUTION, OUTSIDE OF LARGE COMMERCIAL AND MAINSTREAM PLATFORMS, WHICH OFTEN OVERLOOK COMMUNITY-LEVEL INTERESTS.

This study reveals a host of insights and examples of how local groups and leaders leveraged the film to help achieve a range of objectives — including creating spaces for bipartisan collaboration, coalition building, and diverse community conversations around issues of addiction, criminal justice, and discrimination. In some towns, the film served to both advance community-based efforts on these issues and helped *start* community conversations at a scale much larger than had ever been achieved in their community before. For some organizations and community members, the film events helped them to engage their neighbors and community members in better understanding their experiences (especially for formerly incarcerated individuals, those struggling with addiction, and those who have lost loved ones to an unjust criminal justice system and/or addiction) and the importance and meaning of their work (for many community organizations and city leaders).

Ultimately, this study names the specific qualities and attributes of the screening events that held special meaning and unique importance for organizations and community leaders, and it captures a diversity of experiences, reflections and meaningful outcomes of the events, from the perspective of the people who participated in them. In doing so, it goes beyond traditional attendance numbers and metrics for measuring documentary impact, and it brings tangible examples of how one documentary served as the catalyst for a series of movements, new partnerships and events which are still resonating and creating change across the country today.

FILM CREDITS

A FILM BY MERIDIAN HILL PICTURES AND MAGIC LABS MEDIA
IN ASSOCIATION WITH FORK FILMS ARTEMIS RISING FOUNDATION AND HIDDEN EMPIRE FILM GROUP
KARTEMQUIN FILMS AND BIG MOUTH PRODUCTIONS
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To learn more about the film:

firststepfilm.com | @firststepmovie

THE FIRST STEP is available for educational distribution from **GOOD DOCS**

MERIDIAN HILL PICTURES

MAGIC LABS MEDIA

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Note: several other participants contributed to this research in sharing resources and through interviews, but they were not included in the report due to space or anonymity requests.

THE FIRST STEP

Stories of a Documentary in Coalition Building, Social Change, and Pushing for Progress After the Credits Roll

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