

Discussion Guide

OUT *in the* SILENCE

A film and campaign for fairness and equality
in rural and small town America



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OUT *in the* SILENCE

Discussion Guide

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About The Film

Out in the Silence tells the story of a handful of rural residents struggling for inclusion amidst vehement anti-gay sentiment. The story unfolds when filmmaker Joe Wilson's same-sex wedding announcement is published in the newspaper in the small Pennsylvania hometown he left long ago. Drawn back by a plea for help from the mother of a gay teen being tormented at school, Wilson's journey dramatically illustrates the challenges of being an outsider in a conservative environment and the potential for building bridges across differences in religion, faith and values when people approach each other with openness and respect.

People Featured In The Film



C.J. Bills
High school student harassed for being gay



Kathy Springer
C.J.'s mother



Joe Wilson
The filmmaker



Roxanne Hitchcock & Linda Henderson
Lesbian co-owners of the Latonia Theater



Rev. Mark Micklos and his wife
Diana Evangelical couple who engages with Joe



Diane Gramley
Head of the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Family Association

How To Use This Guide

Because the film reveals the transformation that is possible when people summon the courage to break codes of silence as well as barriers built of stereotypes and assumptions, *Out in the Silence* offers a compelling model for dialogue and community engagement. Exploring topics ranging from religion, pluralism and economic development, to intimidation, discrimination and resistance, the ordinary people in *Out in the Silence* can inspire audiences to take extraordinary action.

This guide is designed to help viewers process the issues raised in the film, consider how the film applies to their own lives and engage in productive and open dialogue. Because the guide is written for a wide range of audiences, feel free to select the content that is most relevant to your group or situation. Depending on your needs, the film can be used to:

- Give voice to LGBT people in your community and dispel stereotypes.
- Heighten awareness of issues faced by LGBT people, particularly in small towns and rural communities.
- Foster safe and productive discussions among people who are uncertain about their position on LGBT rights.
- Build bridges between LGBT people and new allies who are “beyond the choir.”
- Raise visibility and funds for local organizations or projects that support LGBT inclusion.
- Prompt coalition-building between local and state groups working on social justice and civil rights efforts.
- Influence diversity and discrimination policies in schools.



Discussion Questions



Part of what makes *Out in the Silence* so useful is that it presents viewers with issues that can be intensely emotional, including those involving deeply held religious convictions, love for one's children and recollections of painful memories. Because passionate responses can as easily derail dialogue as spark transformative discussions, it is a good idea to **have an experienced facilitator present, especially if you hope to engage people with opposing points of view.** You may wish to consult the detailed Facilitation Tips given on p. 10.

GETTING THE CONVERSATION STARTED

- Which of the people in the film did you relate to the most? Why?
- Describe a moment or person in the film that especially moved you. What was it about that scene or individual that touched you?
- Did anything in the film surprise you? How so?
- Would you consider anyone in the film to be a hero? Was there someone whose actions you particularly admired?
- What did you learn from the film? How might what you learned influence your behavior in any way?

ISSUES OF VISIBILITY

The film opens with a quote from poet Audre Lorde: "When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak." Describe moments in your life when you have been afraid to speak or when you have spoken out. What was the outcome? How did your experience of speaking out compare to C.J.'s experience?

Joe says that, "Although gay people are everywhere, we are not always visible." In what ways do Joe, Roxanne and C.J. choose to make themselves visible as gay people? What common threads run through their experiences and what differs? What difference does visibility make to individuals and to the community?

Diane suggests that gay teachers must remain closeted because identifying their sexual orientation to students would be "promoting the lifestyle." What do you think she means by this statement? Do you agree?

Regardless of whether or not they influence legislation, what are the benefits of public forums like the one depicted in the film? How did Kathy, C.J. and Diane benefit from the process, despite their differing opinions?

C.J. and Kathy have an opportunity to meet a family from a nearby town whose son Tim had similar experiences. How do you think it felt for the two of them to learn about Tim's experience and talk to him and his parents?

UNDERSTANDING STEREOTYPES

Prior to viewing the film, what ideas came to mind when you heard the word “gay” or when you heard that someone was an “evangelical Christian”? In what ways did the film confirm or challenge your ideas?

Both Joe and Pastor Micklos set out with very different perspectives on homosexuality as well as some implicit assumptions about each other. How did they both transform over time? How might their perspectives or assumptions have been altered as a result of their interactions with each other?

After C.J. comes out, his classmates start calling him a sissy, a derogatory term for boys and men who are effeminate and/or timid. How does this reflect traditional notions of masculinity, femininity and homosexuality?

After coming out, C.J. is shunned by former friends, harassed and attacked at school on a daily basis, and threatened with serious violence (“We want to see what color a faggot bleeds”). What do you think elicits such extreme responses? What were the factors that made it possible for others to accept such behavior without intervening?

UNDERSTANDING RESISTANCE TO INCLUSION

How would you characterize the sentiments expressed in the letters to the editor following Joe and Dean’s wedding announcement? Compare and contrast statements like: “Common sense tells us that a marriage is between a man and a woman,” “Homosexuality is immoral,” and “It would have been better for you not to have been born.” In what ways are these statements connected? In what ways are they different?

Why do you think groups like the American Family Association (AFA) portray LGBT people as outsiders, even when they are long-term residents like C.J. and Roxanne?

C.J. describes his school experience as “8 hours of pure hell.” Have you seen or experienced the kind of treatment that C.J. or his classmate experienced? Who were the perpetrators? Who were the targets? What did you do? Who was hurt or helped by your actions? If you had the opportunity to do it over, would you do anything differently?

C.J.’s mother, Kathy, suggests that as a taxpayer, she has a right to expect the school board to take action. Put yourself in the shoes of a school board member. Would you consider mandating diversity training or providing a “cyberschool” option as fair and adequate solutions? Why or why not? What other responses might you suggest to address C.J.’s situation?

Walk in Their Shoes

Choose a person featured in the film and consider their perspective on a particular event in the film. Use any of the discussion questions as prompts, or use the scenarios below:

- the publishing of Joe’s wedding announcement
- C.J.’s coming out
- the opening of the Latonia
- Kathy’s testimony at the school board and public hearing
- Diane’s protest at the parade

Put yourself in the shoes of one character and talk through what s/he was thinking and feeling at that time. What do you learn from taking the perspective of another person?

At a restaurant, Joe's server indicates that she has experienced violence based on her Arab ethnicity. What are the possible connections between discrimination based on sexual orientation and discrimination based on race or ethnicity? Why do you think groups like the AFA see these as separate?

The American Family Association describes itself as supporting "traditional values." What do "traditional values" mean to you? How is it different from or similar to the AFA's interpretation?

Both Diane Gramley and Pastor Mark Micklos use Christian teachings as the basis for their positions on gay issues. Mark admits to engaging in anti-gay behavior in the past, but says he doesn't any more specifically because he is a Christian. Diane sees Christianity as the basis for her anti-gay activism. In your view, what accounts for the differences in their perspectives?

RESPONDING TO DISCRIMINATION

In what ways did Joe's decision to put his wedding announcement in the local paper affect his hometown? Who was helped or harmed?

C.J. is amazed when Pastor Micklos expresses regret for the violence that C.J. experienced. How did the Pastor change over the course of the film? In your view, what accounted for the changes? Have you ever re-thought a strongly-held conviction?

What was your reaction to Roxanne's story about being fired after attending a company Christmas party with her partner? Would you agree with Diane Gramley's characterization of proposed legislation protecting people from employment discrimination based on sexual orientation as asking for "special rights"? Why or why not?

Kathy responds to her son's spiral into depression by telling him that, "Nothing you could possibly be in this world would ever make me stop loving you." In what other ways did Kathy demonstrate her support for her son? What difference did that support make to C.J.? What do you think might have happened to C.J. if he had not had a supportive parent at home?

Joe explains to Pastor Micklos that Diane's rhetoric encourages irrational fear and creates a climate of hate that puts C.J. in danger. Do you think people who use such rhetoric should be held accountable when violence occurs, even if they, themselves, don't commit the violence?

In his final encounter with Diane, Joe concludes that confrontation is not an effective tactic for improving the lives of LGBT people living in small towns. What do you learn from the film about the use of confrontation? If confrontation doesn't work in small towns, what does?





CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Joe acknowledges that “It was hard to listen to what the Mickloses were saying, but the fact they had invited us to their home and we were talking seemed like an opening.” How did Joe, Pastor Micklos and his wife create openings? Did you learn anything from them that you could apply to your own community?

The film provides many examples of civic engagement, a few of which are listed below. Pick a few from the list and consider each one’s respective strengths and weaknesses. How effective are these actions in the long run? Do any of them work particularly well for small towns? How about urban areas? Which might you feel comfortable doing in your own community?

- Speaking at a school board meeting
- Producing a radio show
- Organizing a community clean-up day
- Bringing a lawsuit to address discrimination
- Making a documentary
- Reinvigorating a local business
- Writing a letter to the editor
- Convening, attending or speaking at public forums on pending legislation
- Standing up for someone who is being treated unfairly
- Protesting at a public event
- Volunteering for a local political campaign

Consider the role of media in the events that transpired in Oil City. What were the effects of: the newspaper running Joe's wedding announcement, e-mail blasts used by Diane, Diane's radio show, local radio encouraging people to attend the Latonia's opening and/or Joe giving C.J. a camera?

What might have been different if the newspaper had refused to run Joe's announcement, if this had occurred in a big city instead of a small town or if there was no local radio, but only broadcasts from national radio services? How might you engage with your local media to broaden dialogue in your community?

Linda responds to the AFA's efforts with a poem accusing them of "choking our town." The poem asks "Why do you suppose...?" followed by a list of community problems such as empty store fronts and a brain drain, implying that Diane's supporters are responsible. Why do you suppose that these problems exist in Oil City? Compare the ways that Roxanne and Linda attempt to improve their community with the ways that Diane does. Which do you find more effective and why?

Despite a history of exclusion that led Joe to leave and C.J. to consider leaving, the film recognizes the potential of small town spirit to make people feel welcome and appreciated. In terms of creating a welcoming atmosphere for all people, what are the unique challenges and strengths of small towns or rural communities? How inclusive is your community? What did you learn from the film that you might apply to your community?

Kathy Springer describes herself as a "little old back hills mom." Is that how you would describe her? What catalyzed Kathy's transformation from concerned parent into community activist who is "still going to stand up to bigots" even if her son leaves town? What did she do that you could do too?





If you came from a place like Oil City...

For people who were raised in a small town but now live elsewhere, the film may have special significance. Think about bringing the film and its messages back to your hometown, in any of the following ways:

- Arrange a screening and discussion of *Out in the Silence* at a local theater or nearby college or university.
- Send a copy of the film to the local library.
- Use Facebook and other social media to reconnect with hometown friends and let them know your views on the issues.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local hometown paper.

For information on how to purchase the film, visit www.OutintheSilence.com.

As *Out in the Silence* demonstrates, even a small act of courage and openness can cause a wide and long-lasting ripple effect on an entire community.

Taking Action

Take what you learned from *Out in the Silence* to consider ways you might be able to continue the dialogue and support greater inclusiveness in your community. First, **start a conversation with your friends, family, neighbors, colleagues and faith community about what you learned.** Some people may be uncertain of their position on LGBT inclusion, so give them some space to share why, and refer to characters from the film to whom they might relate.

Once you begin the dialogue, consider how you might be able to take it a few steps further:

AT SCHOOL

- Observe GLSEN's National Day of Silence (occurs every year in April) and end it with a screening of *Out in the Silence*.
- Join or start a Gay/Straight Alliance.
- Work with district officials and the school board to ensure there is a Safe Schools policy that includes proactive policies to prevent harassment and bullying.
- Encourage anti-bias training for faculty, staff, administrators and students.
- Join the PTA and introduce LGBT inclusion as a priority.

AT WORK

- Find out if your workplace has a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity or expression, and if not, explore options with management.
- Discuss with Human Resources what benefits are available to same-sex partners and their families.
- Encourage your workplace to observe Gay Pride Month (June) or National Coming Out Day (October 11).
- Attend or sponsor a diversity training.

IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- Form a community action team that gathers to do civic tasks such as clean-ups.
- Form a chapter of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays).
- Find out if your locality has an inclusive non-discrimination ordinance and if not, propose one to town or county officials.
- Encourage community groups such as the Rotary Club and the Elks Club to consider LGBT-friendly events.
- If you belong to a church or religious group, find out about its institutional stance on LGBT inclusion and make suggestions on how to be more welcoming of LGBT community members.

ON THE POLICY LEVEL

- Visit your state representative and senator to express your views about pertinent legislation, such as state non-discrimination laws. Bring a friend or organize a group.
- Contact your United States Representative and Senator to find out where they stand on the key issues and let them know how you feel.
- Volunteer to work in the campaign of a local, state or national candidate who supports your views.
- Call, write or email the White House to express your views on the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and Don't Ask Don't Tell policy. See www.outinthesilence.com for a sample postcard.

For further action ideas, visit www.OutintheSilence.com.

Facilitation Tips

Out in the Silence presents viewers with issues that can be intensely emotional. Because passionate responses can as easily derail dialogue as spark transformative discussions, it may help to think about the following to keep the discussion on track while maintaining a safe and welcoming space.

LANGUAGE

Be sure that your own language and tone are respectful and encouraging, and help participants follow your model.

- **Encourage participants to use “I” language** – “I feel,” “I believe,” “In my experience....”
Remind people that the “I” language guideline also applies when sharing beliefs about divine intention or instruction - “I believe that God commands us to...” rather than “The Bible says....” Explain that this kind of language does not diminish the strength of one’s own convictions, but rather, opens space for people with different belief systems to talk with one another as peers.
- **Declare slurs off limits** and supply people with acceptable replacements. LGBT has become the commonly used acronym to refer collectively to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The shorthand is intended to acknowledge the diversity of sexual identities and cultures in our society, and any of the words represented by the letters are acceptable.

POWER DYNAMICS

Be aware of existing power dynamics and limit their influence over the dialogue.

- **Make sure that everyone is seated in the same way.**
- **Establish procedures so that no one is forced to speak**, but everyone who wants to speak has a chance.

SAFETY AND OPENNESS

Without becoming a therapist, do what you can to take care of people in the room.

- **Establish the difference between dialogue and debate.** In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and actively listening to each other without trying to convince others that they are right.
- **Before engaging in dialogue, establish group confidentiality rules.** There can be negative consequences for individuals who are identified as LGBT, so it is important that revelations about sexual orientation or gender expression be kept confidential unless everyone in the group decides that it is okay to share.
- **If a participant chooses to use the event as an opportunity to “come out”**, the facilitator should honor that decision and model a response for the group; e.g., “We are honored that you trusted us enough to share that with the group. Thank you for your courage.” Touch base with the newly “out” person after the event to ensure that they have access to support and resources.
- **For some people, the film may evoke painful memories** of being bullied, shunned, attacked or discriminated against. To guide the discussion in a healing direction, you may want to encourage a person displaying intense hurt or anger to share her/his story and then ask for responses.
- **If the conversation gets so tense** that it prevents dialogue from continuing, you can:
 - Ask the individual(s) who offer strong opinions to step back and allow others to speak by saying something like, “Part of my job is to make sure that everyone can be heard. Summarize what you are thinking in a sentence or two and let’s hear what others are thinking.”
 - Reflect the emotions embedded in the comments: “I hear you feel very angry/frustrated/etc. about this subject.”
 - Ask everyone to pause and write down a headline to describe what they are feeling. To start the discussion again, put the headlines in a hat and pick one, or do a go-round so everyone hears what everyone else is thinking and then pick a reference from the film to spur further dialogue, or gently move the dialogue to a consideration of action – what do people want to see happen?

Additional Resources

The following organizations provide a range of resources and information related to LGBT concerns. Visit their websites to find out more about these issues and learn about ways you can get involved.

GENERAL LGBT INFORMATION AND RESOURCES



Human Rights Campaign
www.hrc.org



Parents, Families and Friends
of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG)
www.pflag.org



National Gay and
Lesbian Task
www.thetaskforce.org

GAY TEENS & SAFE SCHOOLS



Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) www.glsen.org
Campus Progress www.campusprogress.org
Gay-Straight Alliance Network www.gsanetwork.org
National Youth Advocacy Coalition www.nyacyouth.org
Teaching Tolerance www.tolerance.org
The Trevor Project www.thetrevorproject.org

EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION



ACLU Lesbian & Gay Rights Project www.aclu.org
Lamda Legal www.lambdalegal.org
The Matthew Shepard Foundation www.matthewshepard.org
National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) www.nctequality.org
Out and Equal Workplace Advocates www.outandequal.org
Pride at Work www.prideatwork.org
United ENDA www.fureigh.mayfirst.org

MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Family Equality Council www.familyequality.org
Freedom to Marry www.freedomtomarry.org
Marriage Equality USA www.marriageequality.org

FAITH AND INCLUSION

Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry www.clgs.org
Faith in America www.faithinamerica.info
Institute for Welcoming Resources www.welcomingresources.org
Interfaith Alliance www.interfaithalliance.org
Religious Institute www.religiousinstitute.org
Search for Common Ground www.sfcg.org/programmes/us/programmes_us.html
Soulforce www.soulforce.org

LANGUAGE AND MISINFORMATION

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) www.glaad.org
Political Research Associates www.publiceye.org
Southern Poverty Law Center www.splcenter.org

STATE, LOCAL AND RURAL RESOURCES

Center for Rural Affairs www.cfra.org
CenterLink – The Community of LGBT Centers www.lgbtcenters.org
Center for Rural Strategies www.ruralstrategies.org
Equality Federation www.equalityfederation.org
Rural Policy Research www.rupri.org
Rural Policy Research www.rupri.org
Rural School and Community Trust www.ruraledu.org

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The Film

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Discussion Guide

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Joe Wilson and Dean Hamer founded Qwaves in 2005 to produce documentary films that incite us to abandon our comfortable role as spectators, that compel us to question and to act on issues that matter to us all. Their films have won numerous awards including winner of the PBS Independent Lens Online Shorts Festival, winner of the Videomaker National Documentary Film Challenge, Special Recognition by the Seeds of Tolerance Campaign, multiple Jury and Audience Prizes, and official selection at over 100 film festivals. They have also been used for education and activism by a range of advocacy groups. Qwaves' first feature documentary, *Out in the Silence*, is financially and creatively supported by the Sundance Documentary Film Program.