

PAPER CLIPS

It began as a lesson about prejudice...
What happened next was a **MIRACLE**.



Paper Clips Discussion Guide

Directors: Elliot Berlin, Joe Fab

Year: 2004

Time: 82 min

You might know these directors from:

Bedford: The Town They Left Behind (2009)

FILM SUMMARY

A small town in rural Tennessee, Whitwell boasts 1,600 inhabitants who had no reason to question their views on race and religion or to doubt their long-held belief systems. They were a united, if economically depressed, community of predominantly white fundamentalist Christians. However, age-old stereotypes were challenged when the principal of Whitwell Middle School, Linda Hooper, asked two teachers to find a voluntary after-school project that would introduce diversity and tolerance to the school's 8th grade students.

When filmmakers Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab arrived in Whitwell, the Paper Clip Project was well under way. Through interviews with faculty and students, along with journalists Peter and Dagmar Schroeder, who introduced the project to the wider world, PAPER CLIPS embarks on a four-year journey to see the project develop. People from all over the world were attracted to this tiny Tennessee town. Holocaust survivors visit the children, former U.S. Presidents and celebrities send paper clips and letters, and international news channels cover events. The film reveals how a single lesson in the school curriculum can spark a global movement of love over hatred.

As a German railcar rolls into Whitwell, and 11 million paper clips fill the space that had once transported Holocaust victims to their death, we are reminded of the choices we have as individuals. PAPER CLIPS is a heartwarming tale, the far-reaching effects of which are only beginning as the credits roll.

FILM THEMES

A tale of the remarkable amidst the unremarkable, PAPER CLIPS is a testimony to the healing power of compassion. It serves as living proof that even the smallest intentions can have wide-reaching effects.

COMMON PLACES, INCREDIBLE OUTCOMES

Whitwell could be any small town in America where people carry on as they always have, receiving the lessons of their ancestors as God-given truths, regardless of how outdated or skewed they may be. The tidal wave effect that occurred in Whitwell's community proves that there are no inherent biases in the miraculous. The most humble of places offer perhaps the most verdant, fruitful pastures in which to create lessons relevant to the global community. Perhaps the Paper Clip Project needed Whitwell as much as Whitwell needed it: a common place for a remarkable gathering of people from around the world.

DEFEAT OF STEREOTYPES

Prejudice and stereotypes allowed the Holocaust to happen. 11 million human lives were taken on the basis of race or belief systems. Likewise, the American South has long been considered a hotbed of discrimination, a place where the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded and slavery lingered too long, where the educators at Whitwell admitted to using racial slurs throughout their daily lives. By examining the atrocious by-product of prejudice and miseducation, the Paper Clip Project began where it was needed most, and by teaching about the Holocaust, the prejudices that once gripped the Whitwell community no longer made sense. Big city dwellers who considered Southerners to be small-minded and backwards came to realize that they, too, harbored the very discriminations that they actively railed against.

THE MASSIVE WITH THE MINISCULE

"What is 6 million? I've never seen 6 million," stated one of the Whitwell students when the number of Jewish Holocaust deaths was stated in a daily lesson. As long as the outcome of the Holocaust remained an abstract concept, teachers knew the children would fail to grasp the enormity of what happened. By giving the concept physical contours - with a simple paper clip symbolizing a single lost life - the concept became tangible and real. The paper clip allowed the Holocaust's outcome to touch ground, not only for the children of Whitwell, but for the wider world as well. People found themselves with a memorial that made sense of the insensible through the concrete.

OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Rather than teaching the students about the Holocaust through lectures, keeping heavy subject matter confined to the classroom, Linda Hooper, David Smith, and Sandra Roberts brought learning to life. They pursued a living, breathing, expanding organism of understanding by creating a memorial that transformed exclusion into inclusion, darkness into light, hatred into love.

"There's a far greater power than the people of Whitwell Middle School in charge of this project."

Linda Hooper

"Symbols make us think. Symbols can change the world. Sometimes symbols are all we have to help us maintain our resolve, even on our darkest and most tragic days."

Peter Schroeder

FILM FACTS:

- PAPER CLIPS filmmaker Elliot Berlin was born in Japan where his father worked as a Foreign Service officer. Berlin had dreamt of making a film that explored the historical and cultural influence of Japanese novel "The Tale of Genji." He died of colon cancer in 2009 at the age of 55.
- PAPER CLIPS won 10 awards including an Audience Award at the Washington Jewish Film Festival and Best Documentary at the Marco Island Film Festival. It was also nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Historical Programming.
- Journalists Peter and Dagmar Schroeder purchased the German cattle car that now resides in Whitwell, Tennessee for \$6,000 from a railroad museum north of Berlin.
- After reading an article about the Whitwell paper clip project in The Washington Post, Rachel Pinchot spoke about the article with her husband Ari, a film producer at the Johnson Group, a documentary film and entertainment company, where both Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab worked. The company liked the idea of a film, and the first step in the project was to send Berlin and Fab to Long Island to interview the 4 Holocaust survivors who were visiting Whitwell. That, along with footage of the survivors' visit to Whitwell, convinced Miramax to hop on board the project.
- The first paper clip patent was granted to Samuel B. Fay of the U.S. in 1867.
- The word Holocaust - from the Greek "holos" (whole) and "kaustos" (burnt) - originally referred to an event in which an animal was completely burned and offered as a sacrifice to a god.
- Of the 11 million people killed during the Holocaust, 6 million were Polish (50% Jewish/ 50% Christian). Most of the remaining victims came from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Russia, Holland, France, and Germany. Besides Jews, persecuted groups included Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma Gypsies, homosexuals, people with mental disorders, the deaf, the physically disabled, and those with learning disabilities.
- The Nazis established two types of camps during the Holocaust: concentration camps where prisoners were subjected to extreme work under starvation conditions, and extermination or death camps primary used to produce genocide by gassing. Prisoners were not expected to survive beyond a few hours after arrival.
- During WWI, Adolf Hitler volunteered in the Bavarian Army as an Austrian citizen, serving as a dispatch runner in France and Belgium.
- The railcar at the Whitwell Children's Holocaust Memorial was unveiled on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, a series of coordinated attacks carried out on Jews in Germany and Austria by Nazi paramilitary forces in 1938.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Consider donating to One Clip at a Time, which furthers the work initiated by the students in Whitwell.
2. Do not let the atrocities of the Holocaust be forgotten. The United States Holocaust Museum offers guidelines on how to teach the valuable lessons offered by such a devastating event.
3. The best way to encourage diversity in the world is to be acceptant and tolerant in your daily life.
4. Dorot Memorialine offers the story of Holocaust victims and survivors from first-hand accounts, documenting their lives before, during, and after the Holocaust. A great way to keep the story alive!

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.