



The Overnighters Discussion Guide

Director: Jesse Moss

Year: 2014

Time: 102 min

You might know this director from:

Full Battle Rattle (2008)

Speedo (2003)

FILM SUMMARY

Just a decade ago, Williston, North Dakota was but a sleepy rural community, built on tradition and known for its freezing temperatures and close proximity to the pioneer age military site, Fort Buford. But in the last five years, the population has doubled thanks to the economic explosion caused by the advent of oil fracking in the region and the swarming of unemployed looking for a shot at a six figure salary. Now America's biggest modern boom town, Williston lacks the infrastructure to support such a rapid influx of migrant workers, thus, the city is beginning to buckle under the increasing pressure in its attempt.

In the midst of this boom, a family man named Pastor Jay Reinke began a program within his church with the intention of helping those who've come to Williston looking for a job with just the clothes on their back and are in employment limbo, stuck without food or shelter. This program become known as The Overnighters. Reinke welcomed men down on their luck into the church, provided them with hot meals and cots, only expecting trust and goodwill in return. But in doing so, his community began to question Reinke's decision to aid these men who often brought with them less than favorable histories, eventually causing a moral fissure not only within the community at large, but within Reinke himself.

Reinke, a man with a wide-open heart of gold, risks everything - his reputation, his job, even his family, yet he's not alone. THE OVERNIGHTERS was filmed from within the program itself, meeting its revolving visitors, hearing out their heartbreaking histories and agonizing accounts of life before Williston. In Williston, there is hope, but it's a hope fractured and divided up between the thousands of others who arrived with prospects of oil and aspirations in their mind. THE OVERNIGHTERS has captured the process of Williston's promise of financial wealth imploding before our eyes with heartbreakingly tragic and magnificently layered results.

FILM THEMES

With such rich material to cull through, there are far more than just four themes to explore from *THE OVERNIGHTERS*. The most prominent recurring idea is the fact that fear and compassion are waging war against one another within Williston in the name of the holy. Yet the question remains: What is a community if not a collection of people trying to look out for one another?

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

Pastor Jay Reinke's righteous mission to help the homeless newcomers of Williston comes right from the book he preaches. He truly believes that opening one's doors to the needy and helpless is the right thing to do, even if it means forgiving one's prior sins, whether they be self-destructive, like drug addiction, or predatory, like sexual abuse. Reinke may not wholly believe that men are inherently good, but he seems to at least give them the benefit of the doubt, which is more than he can say for the majority of his community.

FEAR AND DESPERATION

Within the world of the film, Williston seems to run on an economy of fear and desperation. Disillusioned men from across the country have migrated there out of fear of failure in order to become lucrative professionals and often to be supportive husbands or fathers, while the community that existed before the oil boom is fearful of newcomers and of the poverty and crime they've purportedly brought with them. Reinke himself fears for both the homeless and his community, knowing in his heart that they cannot reconcile their opposing fears, all the while harboring an internal fear that his true self will eventually be exposed.

AMBIGUITY OF MORALS

THE OVERNIGHTERS is a film awash in ethical greys. What one person believes to be the morally just thing to do in any given situation could be the very opposite for another person. Reinke's *Overnighters* program was meant to improve the quality of life for those struggling to make it work in their new community, while his long held congregation of permanent residents felt that his helping of the homeless was only harming their community as a whole, encouraging more of the same type of characters to migrate and take root. Who decides what is morally good?

PAYING PENANCE FOR ONE'S OWN SINS

By the film's closing coda, it's clear that despite his righteous intentions as a spiritual leader, Jay Reinke's actions to help the homeless has all along been a sort of spiritual payment for his own perceived sins. Now without a congregation, a job or even his own loving family, Reinke seems to be paying the price for his transgressions.

“The town itself is out of control. It’s like the infrastructure can’t keep up – law enforcement, the roads – everything’s kind of ripping apart at the seams and you felt that the societal fabric that binds the town together was ripping.”

Jesse Moss

“One of those morally complex tales that leaves you churning inside, grasping with the very real-world issues that are brought forth.”

Jason Gorber, TwitchFilm

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Within the film a wide variety of themes begin to rise to the surface. Which of these ideas stuck with you the most? Why?
2. What do you believe was the driving force behind Reinke's decision making? Why do you think he put so much at risk for The Overnights program? Would you have done the same?
3. Have you ever worked or volunteered for a homeless shelter or organization set up to aid the homeless? If so, how were you affected?
4. Despite the dangers inherent to the oil business, would you be tempted by the six digit salaries to relocate your hopes of scoring a job on an oil rig?
5. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to uproot your life and start over somewhere new? What were the circumstances? Did you feel welcomed by your new community? What challenges did you face?
6. Do you think that The Overnights program was essential for the community, or do you agree with Reinke's parish that it could actually cause harm to the community?
7. What do you think could become the next boom? Do you think that oil is the last great economic boom that will be location specific?
8. Do you have any strong beliefs about what is morally good for a community? If so, how did you arrive at these beliefs?
9. Reinke withheld deep-seated personal information about himself from both his family and community. If you were in their shoes, how would you react?
10. Beneath all the turmoil and struggles, Reinke seems to believe that he's paying a sort of spiritual penance for his own sins. Do you believe in the idea of paying a penance for one's wrong doings?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Despite census records showing otherwise, Williston's population doubled in size in just 3 years, growing to an estimated 33,547 last year from 14,716 in 2010.
- In 1995, the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that there were 150 million barrels of oil "technically recoverable" from the Bakken shale, yet after the discovery of a lower shelf of oil in March 2012, it was announced a possible 24 billion barrels existed below.
- Director Jesse Moss shot the film alone on and off for 18 to 20 months. The first of the 6 months he stayed as a guest of Reinke's, as well as in the Overnighters program itself.
- By the end of the shoot, prior to Reinke's final admission and the closing of The Overnighters program, Jesse Moss was banned from filming in the church by the congregation, who at that point had had it with Reinke, the Overnighters and everyone involved with the program.
- Keith Graves, the registered sex offender in the Overnighters program whose presence causes Reinke to make a life changing decision, was later charged with a Class A felony in August of 2014 for gross sexual imposition, human trafficking, promoting prostitution, possession of drug paraphernalia, terrorizing, felonious restraint and reckless endangerment.
- After Reinke was fired, he stayed in Williston and took a series of oil-related jobs, though he would like to teach or work at a social services organization.
- The average rent in Williston is \$2,394 a month for a 700-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment, according to numbers released by Apartment Guide. That beats New York's average of \$1,504 and L.A.'s \$1,411-a-month tally for comparable space.
- According to CNN Money, oil rig workers make on average just under \$100,000 a year, but salaries can vary widely depending on skills.
- Though financially prosperous, oil fracking is unpredictable and can lead to water table contamination and even earthquakes. In December 2014, New York implemented a ban on oil fracking in the state, citing the dangers.
- After winning the Special Jury Prize for Intuitive Filmmaking at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival, THE OVERNIGHTERS has gone on to win the the Inspiration Award at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, be nominated for two Cinema Eye Honors, and also named on the Oscar shortlist for Best Documentary Feature.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Get** involved with or donate to local shelters, food pantries, or outfits like [Project Home](#) or the [Coalition for the Homeless](#) to help the homeless in your own community.
2. **Make** sure you do your research if an opportunity for employment comes up far from home. Reach out and make some connections before leaving everything behind and relying solely on hope.
3. **Be** respectful and empathetic of other people's choices in life, as you never know if and when your roles may be reversed.
4. **Help** support the FRAC Act (Fracturing Responsibility and Awareness of Chemicals Act). Though oil fracking can be financially prosperous, it can also lead to detrimental effects on the environment and local communities. the FRAC Act would require the energy industry to disclose all chemicals used in fracturing fluid as well as repeal fracking's exemption from the Safe Drinking Water Act.

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