



## Rich Hill Discussion Guide

Directors: Andrew Droz Palermo,  
Tracy Droz Tragos  
Year: 2014  
Time: 91 min

### You might know these directors from:

Andrew Droz Palermo:  
One and Two (2015)

Tracy Droz Tragos:  
Be Good, Smile Pretty (2003)

## FILM SUMMARY

With a shared connection to the rural community of Rich Hill, Missouri, filmmaker-cousins Andrew Droz Palermo and Tracy Droz Tragos set out to capture the town's spirit in a meaningful way. Gaining access to real people living real lives, they tell the tale of a town through three boys: Andrew Jewell, Appachey West, and Harley Hood.

The issues they address have been touched upon before, in both factual and fictional storytelling. The destructive cycle of poverty, the exhausting struggle to survive, the dead-end facts of life. Yet RICH HILL does something different—it allows us time to reflect, handing us the gritty troubles bookended by the beauty of space, of a Ferris wheel spinning in the night sky, of burdened children being care-free in the summer grass. The inherent beauty of life itself, even in this impoverished town, is granted breathing room.

Yet the rough and tumble aspects of life break through as we witness the RICH HILL boys in their natural environments. Harley is reactionary, funny, and confused, his mother in jail for attempting to murder the man who molested him. Appachey is awkward, troubled, and just beneath his clumsy surface, sweet. Both chain smoke, guzzle energy drinks, and avoid school. Andrew, unlike the others, treats his body as a powerhouse of potential, exercising, helping his dad with odd jobs, and lovingly throwing arms around his twin sister and helpless mother. But he is troubled all the same, tired of his father's wandering ways, which has the family moving three times alone in the space of the film's year and a half of shooting.

Familiar subject matter is rejuvenated, as we are transported to the expanding epidemic of the impoverished class all across the United States in one small town. With a boyish face and boldly beating heart, RICH HILL invites us to experience poverty not through cold facts but through the warm touch of lives being lived.

## FILM THEMES

As poverty rates soar upwards across the United States, the stark picture offered of Rich Hill, Missouri, could be of anywhere in rural America, where identical issues cycle down through generations.

### THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

People don't just wake up one day to find themselves enveloped in a life of poverty. Financial destitution is passed on in communities through generations, down across the vast valley of time. Poverty develops as an outcome of the state of affairs in an area, the jobs on offer, the conditions provided, the options available. Children are born into the vicious cycle of poverty, trained to live with what they've been given, to adjust to the deprivation and to embrace the little they have. With the love of their families, only some have dreams of a better future driving them forward.

### SURVIVAL MODE

Andrew, Appachey, and Harley had learned to expect close to nothing from life. As their parents and custodians lived from hand to mouth, from moment to moment, and from job to job, they knew that the future was set to look very much like the present. Within their home environments, no one had any grand schemes for improvement, no visions of a future where everything was accounted and paid for. Within the community of Rich Hill, people carried on the same, banking on the 4th of July celebrations to lift their moods and offer escape from the bleak outlook of daily existence. Instead of improving, these children learned to survive with the little they had.

### RESPONSIBILITY TOO YOUNG

As Andrew packed up and prepared to move for the third time in the course of the film, he expressed his exhausted dismay: "I'm so tired of moving. It's like a joke now, packing and moving." The weight of the world came down upon these boys' shoulders at an arguably premature age, forcing them to face up to life truths long before they were emotionally and physically prepared. As their parents were caught up in their own financial and emotional struggles, they did not provide for their children, leaving youngsters to fend for themselves. The cycle thus continues out of necessity, out of the famine of opportunities bred by poverty.

### A GLIMMER OF HOPE

Despite the dire circumstances in which the boys found themselves, each of them retained a semblance of hope for the future. Time had not fully passed them by, as it had appeared to do to their caretakers. This hope was especially apparent in Andrew, who maintained a smile despite the instability of his circumstances. What impact does the family unit have on outlook? As Andrew lived in a home with two parents who loved one another, he seemed able to access joy quicker than Appachey or Harley, who were raised by single maternal figures balancing it all on their own. The quest to understand what constituted an existence, continued. He held out hope, even in the tiniest of doses, where the other two struggled with joy and seemed much closer to the edge of resignation.

**“God has to be busy with everyone else. Eventually He will come into my life. I hope it happens. It’s going to break my heart if it doesn’t.”**

Andrew Jewell

**“I never had any dreams or hopes. I went from mama’s house to being a mother.”**

Delena West, Appachey’s mother

**“When you’re in a place where there’s no work and you can’t pay the bills... you learn to survive.”**

Willie Jewell, Andrew’s father

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How would you describe the feeling you were left with once the film had ended? Would you recommend RICH HILL to a friend?
2. Which of the three boys—if any—impacted you the most? Discuss.
3. What personal experience of poverty do you have? In which economic bracket were you raised? Are you still living in the same economic bracket as your upbringing?
4. Is poverty apparent and prevalent in your community? Is there a clear-cut divide between those with money and those without?
5. Poverty in the United States is on the increase. To what do you attribute this? What are the crucial steps to take to decreasing poverty across the United States?
6. Many of the characters featured in the film appeared to lead unhealthy lifestyles (smoking, drinking copious amounts of sugary drinks, etc.), with two of the three boys smoking at very young ages. How—if at all—are diet and health related to socio-economic class?
7. All three of the boys featured strong mother figures, and all three were born to young mothers. Discuss. How do you think the fact that a two parent household is missing from many impoverished children's lives define and impact these children?
8. The boys' adulthoods await them. Speculate: which—if any or all—of the boys will escape the poverty into which they were born?
9. Children are, in many ways, at the mercy of their parent's decisions. In which ways have you been positively and/or negatively impacted by your upbringing?
10. Do you still live where you were raised? If not, discuss your decision to move and reflections you have on your hometown.

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- In 2014, RICH HILL won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize: “For the beauty of its quiet and powerful storytelling revealing its character’s dignity in the face of immense challenges.”
- Director Tracy Droz Tragos’ first film – “Be Good, Smile Pretty” – was made after she found a picture of her father on the day he was killed in Vietnam, and touches upon the far-reaching implications a death can have on a family. After this film, she searched for a project to which she felt a deep connection. Nearly a decade passed before she teamed up with her cousin, Andrew Droz Palermo, also a filmmaker, and decided to make RICH HILL in the town where their parents grew up. Tragos spent summers and winter holidays in the town as she was growing up, and due to her grandparents’ glowing reputation in Rich Hill, was granted almost immediate access to filming locations.
- Director Andrew Droz Palermo was raised in Missouri and studied graphic design in Chicago. Before shooting films, he shot and directed music videos for bands including The Walkmen. Following RICH HILL, he wrote and directed “One & Two,” a drama about two teenagers living on an isolated farm with their parents.
- The directors collected 450 hours of footage for the film over the course of a year and a half.
- In the spring of 2014 Harley was diagnosed with a brain tumor wrapped around his optic nerve.
- Rich Hill, Missouri, was first established in 1868 and was named after its productive farmland. Coal mining soon became a very lucrative industry and the town thrived, granting it the nickname “the town that coal built.” After WWII, with all the coal mined out, the community was hard hit and many moved elsewhere. At one point, Rich Hill had around 5,000 inhabitants – as of 2013, the population was 1,393.
- Elizabeth Jewell, Andrew’s mother, passed away at the age of 39, one week before she was to get on a plane for the first time to attend Sundance. In addition to Andrew and his twin sister Alyssa, she had two children in a previous marriage, the first of which she had at the age of 17.
- As of 2013, the Federal Poverty Threshold (FPT) was set at \$23,624 for a family of four with two children, and anyone living at or below this level was classified as poor. A family living at double this level (\$47,248 for a family of four with two children) was classified as low-income. Out of the 72 million children under the age of 18 in the United States, 44% live in low-income families, while 22% live in poor families.
- The percentage of children in low-income families increased from 39% in 2007 to 44% in 2013, and 69% of children in low-income families reside with a single parent.
- According to research, poverty is the single greatest threat to a child’s well-being.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Learn** more about [Talkpoverty](#)—an organization connected to the [Center for American Progress](#)—sets out to dramatically reduce poverty in the United States.
2. **Visit** the RICH HILL [website](#), it refers viewers to causes the filmmakers support in their quest to assist children living in poverty.
3. **Donate** to [a fund](#) that goes directly towards helping Andrew, Appachey, and Harley, in addition to financing screenings of the film in a wide range of locations.
4. **Get involved** with the [Children’s Defense Fund](#) – that works hard to raise the standard of living for children in America. There are many ways to get involved through their website.

## 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.**