



Check It Discussion Guide

Directors: Dana Flor, Toby Oppenheimer
Year: 2016
Time: 90 min

You might know these directors from:

Dana Flor:
The Nine Lives of Marion Barry (2009)

Toby Oppenheimer:
The End: Inside the Last Days of the Obama White House (2017)
The Nine Lives of Marion Barry (2009)

FILM SUMMARY

At first glance, they seem unlikely gang-bangers. Some of the boys wear lipstick and mascara; some wear stilettos. They carry Louis Vuitton bags, but they also carry knives, brass knuckles, and mace. As vulnerable gay and transgender youth, they've been shot, stabbed, and raped. Once victims, they've now turned the tables. Started in 2009 by a group of bullied 9th graders, today these gang members all have rap sheets.

Young, homeless, African-American, poor, and LGBT, the Check It was founded out of a basic need for survival. Without a guiding force, without mother nor father nor community to rely upon, they found their own support system in each other. Together they could create something none of them had ever known: family. But this was no peaceful gathering of happy souls. "This group of children holds their pain in and when it comes out, it comes out in a bad way," explains Ron Moten, a man who makes it his mission to help this group of youths. With a well-earned reputation as a violent, do-not-mess-with-us gang, the Check It were furious and ready to fight.

"This isn't anything I would want for anybody. I want better," explains Check It member Trey. Through the efforts of Ron "Mo" Moten, boxing coach Duke, and fashion camp leader Jarmal Harris, Check It members begin to see that life can be lived otherwise, despite the odds firmly stacked against them. "Just being black, you have a lot of odds against you," Moten says. "Being gay and black? That's a whole different ball game."

CHECK IT makes no qualms about it: life is hard on the streets of Washington, D.C., and more so if you are African-American and LGBT. As a window into this otherwise unknown world, this film is invaluable, a wake up call to the seat of the nation's leadership, located a few footsteps from where such violence, poverty, and shameful injustice plays out.

FILM THEMES

At the doorstep of the American capital, homeless LGBT youth struggle to survive. Banding together and employing their fists to rewrite the story that's been handed to them, they find family in one another.

THE BULLIED BECOME THE BULLIES

Differences are perceived by some as a threat. As an African-American LGBT youngster, your life is unlike the majority of others in your community, your city, and your nation. The challenge you pose to others, the questions you raise by following your own rhythm, often inspires a barrage of physical, psychological, and emotional bullying. Labeled negatively, you learn to fight back. "If no one was going to stand up for us, we stood up for ourselves," states Day Day, one of the founders of the Check It gang. In the words of Ron Moten, "If somebody's bullied, they become bullies at some point. They become predators instead of prey." Violence proved its power for the Check It.

GANG AS FAMILY

A sense of belonging, whether as a cherished member of a family or recognized member of a community, is an essential human need. The support, love, and safety provided by family enables us to meet the challenges life presents. For the majority of the Check It members, biological families were non-existent. "I don't know my mother or my father," states Skittles. In addition, their local community rejected them. "Normally people have someone to turn to: a mom, a teacher, a coach. They don't have anybody, so they lean on each other. That's what a gang can be. It's a family," explains Ron Moten. For the Check It, as Day Day explains, "They're the family I never had."

POVERTY AND PAIN IN THE U.S.

The U.S. calls itself a global superpower, a modern nation, but the daily life of a member of the Check It, just minutes from the White House, puts this national pride to the test. "This is right at the doorstep of the nation's capital, where some of the most powerful people in the world reside. It's like nobody gives a damn. Do we just turn our back on our children?" states Ron Moten. In order to maintain its claimed status as a nation of justice and freedom for all, the U.S. has much work to do right in its own backyard.

TURNING NEGATIVE INTO POSITIVE

When Ron Moten decided to make up for his wrongdoings through direct action, he came across the Check It gang. Encountering a group of very troubled and intensely challenged kids, he set out to turn the negative into positive. Most members loved to dress up and showed an intense interest in fashion. By enrolling a few of them in Jarmal's fashion camp, he was able to offer them a positive outlet and creative channel for their energy. Likewise, by challenging Skittles to employ his top-notch fighting skills in the boxing ring rather than the streets, he flipped the negative into the positive and offered the seeds of a brighter future.

"Being black, you have a lot of odds against you. Gay and black? They're in a world of their own."

Ron "Mo" Moten

"They're the family I never had... When we go out places, we go as one."

Day Day

"You learn from each other in the streets. That's what after-school is."

Tray

FILM FACTS:

- CHECK IT premiered at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival, and went on to screen at several international film festivals.
- Directors Flor and Oppenheimer worked together for years on a film called *The Nine Lives of Marion Barry*, a period in which they spent a lot of time in the poorer, mainly African-American parts of Washington, D.C. They came across Ron “Mo” Moten at this time, and he told them about the Check It gang. After an initial meeting at a Denny’s diner with Mo and five of the leaders, the gang agreed to let them make a film.
- Ron “Mo” Moten published his memoirs in 2013, entitled “[Drinking Muddy Water: The Streets, the Scandals, the Party of Lincoln](#),” in which he describes his journey from a life of crime, in and out of prison, back to the streets to help youth.
- According to the [California Penal Code](#), a gang is: “any ongoing organization, association, or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal...which has a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.” American street gangs can be traced back to the 1780s, when groups of immigrants banded together in urban areas, particularly New York.
- As of [2015](#), there were around 33,000 active street, motorcycle, and prison gangs in the U.S., with approximately 1.4 million members.
- Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States, was founded in 1790, and has housed every single U.S. President since 1800, when the White House was built. The [2016 population](#) came in at just over 680,000, with 17.3% of people living below the poverty line, the second highest national rate after Mississippi. Since its founding, D.C has always had a high population of African-Americans, and as of 2016 nearly 50% of the population was African-American. Same-sex marriage was legalized in D.C. in 2009.
- In a [report](#) by the Human Rights Campaign on growing up LGBT in America, 92% of those surveyed states that they hear negative messages about being LGBT, mainly at school, online, and from their peers, while 68% say they hear negative messaging from elected leaders.
- A total of 3.7% African-American adults identify as LGBT, equivalent to just over 1 million Americans. Washington, D.C., has the [highest percentage](#) of adult LGBT African-Americans of all U.S. states, with a total of 4.5%.
- [A study](#) found that 20% of homeless youth are LGBT, with 59% of those engaging in prostitution, as compared to 33% of heterosexual youth.
- “It’s happening in D.C., just a couple miles from the White House, and I don’t think these kids or their problems are really known,” explained CHECK IT executive producer Steve Buscemi on why he got involved in the film.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Donate** to [Check It Enterprises](#), “a social enterprise derived from the positive transformation of leaders of the only documented gay gang in America, maybe the world.” Or buy one of their own-designed [t-shirts](#).
2. **Get involved** in the It Gets Better Project, an international network working to make the world a better place for LGBT youth. Visit their [GET INVOLVED](#) page to find a way in which you can contribute.
3. **Help** the filmmakers and members of the Check It [attend the film festivals](#) where CHECK IT is playing. Their personal tales and attendance at Q&As help support and spread their important message.
4. **Share** CHECK IT with your community. As director Flor states, the fact that so little is known about homeless LGBT youth is “shameful.” Through education and the sharing of personal stories, lives can be saved.

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.